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## **"The Blackness of Blackness": Meta-Black Identity in 20th/21st Century African American Culture**

Casey Hayman

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**“The Blackness of Blackness”: Meta-Black Identity in 20th/21st Century  
African American Culture**

A Dissertation Presented

by

CASEY J. HAYMAN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2017

Department of English

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## **DEDICATION**

For Vanessa, Josephine, and Ellison--my inspiration and motivation through it all.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **“THE BLACKNESS OF BLACKNESS”: META-BLACK IDENTITY IN 20<sup>TH</sup>/21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE**

SEPTEMBER 2017

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The central claim in this dissertation is that much contemporary African American cultural expression would be better conceptualized not as “post-black,” as some would have it, but as what I call “meta-black.” I use the preface “meta-” because while this contemporary black identity also resists sometimes constrictive conceptions of “authentic” black identity from within the African American community, I diverge from theorists of “post-blackness” in observing the ways that, as Nicole Fleetwood observes, blackness necessarily “circulates” within a technologically-driven mediascape, and these postmodern black subjects work within and against the constraints of this aural-visual regime of blackness in order to perform subjectivities that exceed the containment of these stereotypical representations.

From Du Bois’s debate with Marcus Garvey over issues of assimilation and separatism, to the Black Arts movement’s attempts to articulate a distinctly black aesthetic and cultural identity, to recent debates by scholars across the disciplines like Fred Moten and Tommie Shelby, and “black pessimists” like Frank Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, and Jared Sexton over the metaphysical and pragmatic value of blackness as



identity in a post-civil rights era, the problem of the meaning of black identity in the United States lies at the center of African American politics and cultural expression. *The Blackness of Blackness* approaches this problem through close analyses of the work and public personas of a set of artists spanning a number of cultural mediums, including authors such as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Percival Everett; musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Nicki Minaj, and Beyoncé; and filmic icons such as Sidney Poitier. I claim that this notion of meta-blackness more accurately accounts for the ways that African American subjects from the mid-20th century on, living in an increasingly mass-mediated American cultural landscape, have adopted a novel approach to articulating subjectivities that resist stereotypical notions of blackness proffered in the sphere of popular culture, and demonstrate how these artists' meta-black aesthetics model possibilities for contemporary blackness.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Black is,” declares the preacher in the dreamlike vision of Ralph Ellison’s invisible protagonist, “...an’ Black ain’t.” More than six decades past the publication of Ellison’s seminal novel of African American identity and a half-century after the legal codification of equality effected by the Civil Rights Act, African American Studies continues to grapple with this paradox that is cryptically proclaimed, but never resolved, in Ellison’s novel. While commentators from both the left and the right wishfully declare America to be “post-racial,”” material realities such as those evinced by the killings of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, and numerous other African American men and women at the hands of law enforcement, as well as the nation’s flourishing prison-industrial complex seem to suggest that however far America may have come towards racial equality, we have a long and difficult road yet to travel. Even with these reminders of the ways that race continues to “matter,” there are at the same time many contemporary voices from within the African American community urging the exploration of the emancipatory possibilities of “post-blackness,” as aesthetic and identity.

Of course, this tension between the necessity and desire for a communal identification with an “authentic” blackness and the desire for eclectic subjectivity is not new, having existed at least since W.E.B. Du Bois described the experience of the African American in 1902 as “the history of this strife,--this longing . . . to merge his double self into the better and truer self,” while wishing “neither of the older selves to be lost” (11). And yet, today, with the exponentially increasing possibilities for black identity afforded by the legal gains made during the Civil Rights and Black Power

Movements, the economic gains made by a growing black middle class, and the cultural circulation made possible by mass communications technology, African American Studies as a discipline, and blackness as an identity more generally, seem to be at something of a flash point. While cultural theorist Touré may declare that “We are in a post-Black era where the number of ways of being Black is infinite. Where the possibilities for an authentic Black identity are boundless,” he also must concede that “what it means to be Black has grown so staggeringly broad, so unpredictable, so diffuse that Blackness itself is indefinable.” In short, Black is, and Black ain’t.

*“The Blackness of Blackness”: Meta-Black Identity in 20th/21st Century African American Culture*, aims to enter this conversation at the nexus of the “authentic” and the “indefinable” in Touré’s formulation of contemporary blackness, the “is” and the “ain’t.” I claim that those like Touré looking to bridge the divide between the continuing relevance of a communal black identity and a radical individual freedom in the contemporary context would be well-served to look back to black artists like Ellison and their engagements with aural and visual communications technologies, and to look more closely at contemporary literary artists like Percival Everett, Claudia Rankine, and popular cultural artists like Beyoncé and their creative uses of the history of blackness (and how blackness as identity has circulated in the popular imaginary) in America. This argument has relevance not only to more mainstream debates about post-blackness and post-racialism, but also to debates within the academy. My account of the work that this aesthetic performs within and against the aural and hypervisible stereotypes of blackness circulating in an increasingly mediated society critically intervenes in the debates between so-called “Afro-Pessimists,” who argue for the contemporary persistence of a

black “social death” forged in slavery, and those who (sometimes uncritically) champion the liberatory possibilities for black identity conceived of as postmodern performativity and hybridity.

In African American literary studies specifically, my argument offers a modification of Kenneth Warren’s important but controversial recent claim of the “end” of African American literature. Ellison’s *Invisible Man* may, as Warren claims, have marked the pinnacle and even the last chapter in a mode of African American literature that responded specifically to Jim Crow social realities. However, classing Ellison’s novel merely as a final demand for the recognition of black humanity before that humanity was at long last legally recognized a half-century ago is to ignore the futurity of Ellison’s articulation in his writing of a mode of black subjectivity that uses the detritus of mass cultural (and very often, stereotypical) representations of blackness as the very building blocks of an eclectic, meta-black self. This meta-black aesthetic, as I term it, a blackness that both “is” and “ain’t,” provides an important model for black subjects of the late 20th and 21st centuries.

I should be clear that in elaborating on this term, meta-blackness, I am not trying to reinvent the wheel. Numerous terms have been floated over the last almost thirty years to describe an increasingly ambivalent relationship to blackness as a category of identity on the part of cultural producers in the post-Civil Rights era. These range from Trey Ellis’ declaration of a “New Black Aesthetic” in 1989, to Nelson George’s term “Post-Soul” (elaborated on by Mark Anthony Neal and others), to contemporary manifestations like Touré’s “post-blackness” (a term which he draws from visual artist Thelma Golden).

All of this work, including Touré's, has its merits, and regardless of which term one prefers, their sheer proliferation should be enough to tell us that *something* fundamental has changed about African American cultural expression and identity over the past three decades. And so I don't submit the term "meta-black aesthetic" as a replacement for any of these other terms, but I do think that it can provide a useful modification, particularly as it concerns contemporary conversations over post-racial identities and the "end" of African American literature.

First, using a prefix such as "meta-" rather than "post-" points us away from overly rigid periodizing tendencies and allows us to observe that black artists and thinkers have been making use of techniques that we might describe as "meta-" in relation to their uses of blackness at least as far back as Du Bois at the very beginning of the 20th century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites contemporary usages of the prefix "meta-" as being "[p]refixed to the name of a subject or discipline to denote another which deals with ulterior issues in the same field, or which raises questions about the nature of the original discipline and its methods, procedures, and assumptions." This is what I will examine in my use of the term "meta-blackness"--the way that contemporary subjects raced as black employ blackness as it is culturally circulated to raise questions about conceptions of blackness and the assumptions that underlie them. For as long as there have been black people in America, there have been circulating representations and ideas about black people in America, and it has behooved black people to understand these circulating notions in order to resist or take control of them. But of course this circulated blackness begins to increase exponentially from around the mid-20th century to the present, to the point where I would say that a meta- approach to blackness as

identity and the history of black people in America now represents a very prominent if not prevalent element of African American cultural expression.

Further, using the term “meta-black” rather than “post-black” helps us address one of the primary critiques leveled at Touré’s conception (but also applied to Ellis’ earlier “New Black Aesthetic”): only those black folks who come from relative class privilege, from a middle to upper-middle class background, can really “afford” to be “post-black.” And indeed, as Abdul Ali points out in a review of Touré’s book, of the “105 prominent black people” interviewed for the book, “The sheer lack of ‘ordinary’ black folks in this book is appalling -- no social workers, stay-at-home moms and dads, school teachers, postal workers, welfare recipients, small-business owners, immigrants or struggling artists were consulted in this de facto town hall meeting on ‘Blackness’.”

While the literary and popular cultural artists I examine admittedly could not be said to represent “ordinary” black Americans, I do think that the “meta-black” identity that these artists express in their work might help better attune us to how blackness is experienced in contemporary America. To conceive contemporary blackness as “meta-” focuses on black subjects’ real-life negotiations with mass-mediated representations of Blackness, signifying on these representations to articulate a nuanced, eclectic subjectivity that exceeds these representations. Rather than moving “beyond” blackness from a place of relative economic privilege, meta-black subjects engage with popular notions of blackness to forge their own versions of black identity.

In the first chapter, I turn to what I see as roots of the meta-black aesthetic in the uses of music in W.E.B. Du Bois’s seminal *The Souls of Black Folk*, and James Weldon

Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. In *Souls*, Du Bois famously positions "the Negro folk-song . . . not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas," and goes on to claim it as "the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people" (155). Even if, as Warren has claimed, critics have overemphasized music in black cultural studies, operating under the assumption that "music rather than literature has been the most politically powerful cultural force wielded by black Americans in the struggle against inequality" (25), it is no accident that early African American literary artists and thinkers like Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, and James Weldon Johnson turned to black musical expression for proof of the humanity of African Americans. Douglass famously muses in his 1845 *Narrative*, for example, that "I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject" (24). As Du Bois points out, music was one of the only viable means of expressing "the articulate message of the slave to the world" (156), for as Douglass had so forcefully observed, slaves were systematically denied literacy and the written word. Leroi Jones cites some very pragmatic reasons for the importance of music in early African American life, writing in *Blues People* that "Only religion (and magic) and the arts were not completely submerged by Euro-American concepts. Music, dance, religion, do not have *artifacts* as their end products, so they were saved. These nonmaterial aspects of the African's culture were almost impossible to eradicate" (16).

But the question remains, then, why, even as African Americans like Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson and the authors of the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance in the



early 20th century were busy breaking into the literary scene, these same writers returned so often to the trope of black music in their writing, going so far as to try, as Du Bois did in heading each chapter of *Souls* with bars of slave spirituals, to incorporate this music into the very form of their literary output. Certainly, there is an aspect of intra-racial paternalism involved, evident in Du Bois's self-appointed role as interpreter of the "veiled and half articulate" slave spirituals in *Souls*, and in the declaration by Johnson's ex-colored man that "nothing great or enduring, especially in music, has ever sprung full-fledged and unprecedented from the brain of any master; the best that he gives to the world he gathers from the hearts of the people, and runs it through the alembic of his genius" (62).

However, despite these patronizing attitudes towards the folk, and towards (especially in Du Bois's case) popular culture, both Du Bois and Johnson's invocations of mediated, popular forms of music in their writing elaborate a mode of black identity that engages with blackness as it circulates. Through an analysis of Du Bois's writings on the Fisk University Jubilee Singers and Johnson's literary invocation and real-life participation in ragtime and popular songwriting, I argue that both authors were very much cognizant of the double-edged nature of technological modernity's effect on their representations of blackness and black music. Both understood that in the 20th century, more than ever before, to be "black" meant to live with popularly circulated notions of the meaning of "Blackness," and both situate themselves and their writings at these quintessentially modern junctures of reproduction and reality, and authentic and commercial culture.

I build on the work of other scholars to elaborate on the “phono/graphic” aspect of Du Bois and Johnson’s invocations of music in their writing. In their concern with the divide between the phonic (the aural) and the graphic (written, to be visually “read”), Du Bois and Johnson begin to theorize what scholars have since come to think of as the “white gaze.” As George Yancy has recently described its effects, “the Black body, through the hegemony of the white gaze, undergoes a phenomenological return that leaves it distorted and fixed as a pre-existing essence” (2). Johnson’s narrator gives a more vivid picture of this experience when he describes the moment when he tells his future wife, a white woman, that he is black: “when I looked up she was gazing at me with a wild, fixed stare as though I was some object she had never seen. Under the strange light in her eyes I felt that I was growing black and thick-featured and crimp-haired” (123). As Nicole Fleetwood points out, scholars of black cultural studies throughout the 20th century have tended to treat the visual sphere “as a punitive field--the scene of punishment--in which the subjugation of blacks continues through the reproduction of denigrating racial stereotypes that allow whites to define themselves through the process of ‘negative differentiation’” (13).

These notions, of the visual as a restrictive field, and of music and the aural as potentially liberating discursive spaces, persist throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, and they often creep into critical analyses of black culture. These ideas have manifested in a critical tendency to posit black musical expression (and particularly pre-modern black musical expression) as the locus of an “authentic” and even resistant black identity, and this tendency even finds its way into more forward-thinking analyses that aim to discuss the development of black cultural expression in the context of

technological modernity. Alexander Weheliye, for instance, cites sound's "openness" and "opacity" of meaning as key factors in its critical role in black cultural expression, "particularly when contrasted to the way vision has been codified in Western modernity," and finds that developments in sound technology, "disturbing any seemingly predetermined symbiosis between the aural and the visual, have allowed for a multiplication of practices and contexts for both the production and reception of black musical cultures" (70).

Generally speaking, I concur with Weheliye's assessment of the possibilities that developing sonic technologies offered black artists, and his articulation of the way that artists have exploited these slippages between sound and source and the aural and visual open up exciting possibilities for my own critical analysis of black culture. However, the binary that Weheliye sets up between the visual as a codified, fixing space, and the aural as a space of openness and possibility is difficult to sustain, particularly when one is analyzing black cultural production in the context of technological modernity. Because just as rapidly developing sound technologies like the phonograph were bringing black sounds into homes in America and worldwide, so were visual technologies, television in particular, bringing images (and sounds) of blackness into these same homes.

Published in 1952, Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, arrives at a critical point in this developing confluence of the aural and the visual with rapidly expanding communication technologies, and Ellison takes this up as a primary theme in his novel. This theme, along with his invocation of Louis Armstrong (as artist and audio-visual icon in his novel, is the subject of my second chapter. In my analysis of Ellison's novel, and of his deployment of Armstrong, I depart somewhat from criticism that

overemphasizes the role of music in the novel. A majority of these critics find Ellison's use of music to be a synthesis of oral culture as embodied by the black musical aesthetic with the written high modernist novelistic form. While Ellison's intentions may have been in part to effect this sort of synthesis, we should not ignore the important roles that technology and the world of mass-mediated culture play in the novel. The significance of the fact that the black musical listening experience that frames the novel is a technologically-mediated one, as the protagonist listens to a record of Louis Armstrong, seems to go oddly unaddressed in much of the critical conversation on Ellison. In this chapter, then, I investigate the implications of the fact that, rather than some sort of "authenticity," Ellison's invisible man seems to be especially drawn to the artificial, mediated nature of the Armstrong record, to the point that he wants to "hear five recordings . . . all at the same time" (8).

It would be stating the obvious to say that *Invisible Man* is heavily invested in a discussion of blackness in the visual sphere, but given the novel's timing, it is surprising that analyses of the novel in conjunction with emergent televisual technologies are difficult to find. Ellison's narrator describes others' inability to "see" him thusly: "it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imaginations--indeed, anything and everything except me" (3). It doesn't seem, in the context of an American imagination of blackness that was increasingly being shaped by filmic, televisual, and otherwise mass-mediated images of blackness, too far-fetched to imagine this "distorting glass" described by Ellison as a television screen. I claim that Ellison chooses to invoke Armstrong at a time when the jazz innovator's career was resurgent thanks in large part

to his frequent appearances in film and on television *because* of Armstrong's complex roles as both an icon of an "authentic" musical tradition and as, for better and for worse, an icon of what blackness would and could represent in the technologically-mediated present and future.

Incorporating Ellison's own enthusiasm for and writings on home stereo technology, along with recent writing by Tsitsi Jaji applying stereo sound as a metaphor for transcultural resonances, I find that Ellison intentionally represents Armstrong "in stereo." By including Armstrong in the novel in this technologically-mediated and reproduced form, Ellison seems to suggest that there is no objectively "real" Louis Armstrong that his audiences have access to, and that we always see and hear him, like the narrator, as though "surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass" (3). In posing this "stereo" version of Armstrong as a potential model for his narrator's self-realization, Ellison, in what I claim is a groundbreaking instance of meta-black expression, gestures towards the potential power and possibility in engaging, like Armstrong, with stereotypes of blackness permeating the cultural imaginary. As such, the "meta-" approach to blackness modeled by Ellison's writing and by his narrator, represents a key turning point in the mobilization of such aesthetic techniques as, to borrow Kenneth Burke's term, "equipment for living" as black in an ever-increasingly technology-saturated, mass-mediated world (598).

Of course, the possibilities that Ellison explores in outlining his meta-black aesthetic in the context of audio-visual technological developments raise provocative and troubling questions regarding intersubjectivity and the difficulties of interracial communication, and I take up some of these questions in my third chapter, putting the

writing of James Baldwin and Jack Kerouac into conversation. One of the more provocative questions regarding interracial communication is voiced at the closing of *Invisible Man* when the narrator asks, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” James Baldwin spent much of his career, particularly in the mid-20th century, exploring just what it might mean to say that black popular culture, and music specifically, speaks for American culture as a whole, and that black music is a discursive space where black speakers might speak *to* a “mainstream” American (read: white) audience.

As Baldwin writes in 1951, “It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear” (“Many Thousands Gone” 19). Prepared or not, however, it was a story that many white Americans began to hear more insistently in the mid-20th century. And though Baldwin may not have believed that white Americans truly understand black music, he seems to see a need for genuine efforts at listening across difference, whether such efforts are successful or not. Immediately following the quote cited above, Baldwin continues:

As is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence; and the story is told, compulsively, in symbols and signs, in hieroglyphics; it is revealed in Negro speech and in that of the white majority and in their different frames of reference. The ways in which the Negro has affected the American psychology are betrayed

in our popular culture and in our morality; in our estrangement from him is the depth of our estrangement from ourselves. (“Many Thousands Gone” 19)

Baldwin thus argues for the importance of the attempts at communication and listening across the color line that can occur in music’s discursive spaces, however incomplete and fumbling these attempts may be. And in adopting, in his own written discourse in this essay, an ambiguous “we” which does not locate itself on either side of the color line, and in his observation that “in our estrangement from him is the depth of our estrangement from ourselves,” Baldwin seems to be particularly taken by what he interprets as the mutually constitutive, mutually penetrating nature of these acts of listening across difference.

In his representations of race relations and black music in his writing, Jack Kerouac was also extremely interested in these moments of interracial (mis)communication. In this chapter, then, I put Kerouac (focusing particularly on his 1958 novella *The Subterraneans*) into conversation with his black contemporary Baldwin, taking as my premise the idea that we may gain important insights into the nature of race in mid- to late-20th century America by examining representations of the black gaze as it “looks back” at these white characters and authors. This leads me to think through how Baldwin in particular begins to theorize sound and the aural as important potential means of sublating the tension, which is provocatively explored by both authors, between the racializing gaze that fixes identity, and the physical reality of the presence of the body and complex subjectivity of the other

My analysis of Kerouac and Baldwin in this chapter pivots around the intersection of the tropes of sight, seeing, and the gaze, with those of music, listening, and sound. There has been much work in literary as well as film and media studies addressing race as visual metaphor, specifically around the trope of the racializing “white gaze.” Less research has been done, however, on what happens and what is revealed when the racialized other “looks” back. In Kerouac’s *On the Road*, he describes the Jazz musician Lester Young playing with “eternity on his huge eyelids” (251). There is an almost overwhelming preponderance, in Kerouac’s *On the Road* and *The Subterraneans*, of descriptions of black people (and specifically, black jazz musicians) gazing at Kerouac’s white characters in these works, and the anxiety that this gaze causes these characters. In a particularly striking example, in *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac’s narrator Leo Percepied describes Charlie Parker “directly looking into my eye looking to search if really I was that great writer I thought myself to be” (14).

In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin writes of “the white man’s profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is,” and, simultaneously, his “equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror” (341). In reading *The Subterraneans* in the context of critical observations on race and vision made by black contemporaries of Kerouac’s such as Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, I think that we can observe this dual desire for invisibility and visibility in the work of white authors such as Kerouac. And further, I find that this desire reveals a profound anxiety among “white” Americans of the mid- to late-20th century as to the fundamental absence underlying their white identity. In *On the Road*, narrator Sal Paradise describes seeing himself as a stranger and “a ghost . . . leading a haunted life”



(17). Anxieties surrounding this “spectral” whiteness, traced through the return of the black gaze, emerge with particular force in the mid-20th century in the work of white writers like Kerouac, and these anxieties continue to haunt conceptions of American “whiteness” to this day.

And of course, the recognition that a fundamental premise upon which one has based one’s identity is, in essence, an apparition leads to a profound crisis of identity, and this is where black sound and music figure in to the discussion. The essentially interpenetrative nature of the musical listening experience provides a novel means of mediating these dueling gazes and the confrontation between the bodies of self and other. Whereas Maurice Merleau-Ponty has likened the gaze to touch, sound provides a penetrative palpation, touching, as Jean-Luc Nancy notes, both one’s sensate physical body as well as one’s mental sense of the outside world, oneself, and other sounding bodies. Despite the fact that Kerouac and his characters’ understandings of these sounds made by racialized others are incomplete and often mediated through primitivizing stereotype, their moments of listening may be read in part as recognitions of the possibilities offered by the black musical aesthetic for assuaging the “real sadness,” as Baldwin aptly puts it, that is opened up when the lie behind the unreality of whiteness is revealed in the black gaze.

In my analysis of Baldwin’s writing on music, particularly in his 1962 novel *Another Country*, much of the focus is on his writing about black female singers, in particular his characterization of the jazz singer Ida, and his representation of moments of listening to records by Mahalia Jackson and Bessie Smith. Emily Lordi has rightly noted that though his gender politics developed over time, many of Baldwin’s early written

invocations of black female singers tended to fall back on representations of the black female singer as the muse enabling male artistic achievement.

Similar criticisms could certainly be leveled at the gender politics of other artists who I analyze in this dissertation, and so in the fourth chapter, I move ahead in historical time to foreground the meta-black artistry of contemporary black female singers/rappers who are every bit as iconic in the contemporary moment as Smith, Jackson, and Billie Holiday (who Baldwin also writes extensively on) were in theirs. While I think the case could certainly be made for classing elements of the aesthetics of black female singers such as those of Baldwin's era (including a figure like Nina Simone) as "meta-black," I choose in this fourth chapter to analyze hip hop (or "hip hop soul") artists Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj in part because I find that it is in hip hop music and culture, with its simultaneous technological futurity and archival revisionism, and its meta-black play with and against popular culture, that this mode of identity finds its most profound iteration in the 20th century. But of course, men and masculinity, and stereotypes of black masculinities, have tended to be overrepresented in the popular cultural sphere, and in hip hop music and culture especially. Hip hop has been, traditionally, a hypermasculine space where women's expressions have often been marginalized or reduced to stereotype. While misogyny in hip hop remains alive and well, to be sure, it seems to me that there has been a recent resurgence of female artists in the hip hop and hip hop soul genres, of which presently Minaj and Beyoncé are arguably the most iconic representatives.

I claim in this chapter that the space for this new wave of women in hip hop has been created in part as a result of the conscious meta-black play within and against

stereotypes of femininity, blackness, and of the history of black women in hip hop by artists like Beyoncé and Minaj. Alongside work by hip hop feminist scholars, I analyze Beyoncé's recent turn to becoming a more "political" artist (though this is less of a turn than it is often seen as being), and analyze her 2016 visual album *Lemonade* as a paradigmatic example of her meta-aware signification on the cultural histories of blackness and black womanhood, and black female musicianship. I find that she makes these significations in the service of not only political commentary, but also as a compelling model for how black female identity, with all of its attendant contradictions and lack of resolution, may be *lived* in the 21st century. In *Lemonade*, Beyoncé integrates elements of the "strong" and "angry black woman" stereotypes that Melissa Harris-Perry observes hovering as dueling cultural stereotypes over popular notions of black womanhood in America, attempting to bridge these stereotypes to forcefully articulate a nuanced black female subjectivity.

In the case of Minaj's work, the stereotype of black womanhood that she most often interacts with is that of the "Jezebel," or that of the hypersexualized black female. In her use of multiple personae which signify upon and complicate stereotypical circulating notions of intersectional black and female identities, and in her explicit (in more than one sense) meta-referencing of iconic female figures in hip hop history (the "Queen Bee," Lil' Kim, in particular), Minaj takes stereotypes of blackness and black femininity to their extremes as a means of emptying them of some of their power, and of reappropriating some of that power to express a nuanced individual subjectivity, for herself and her audience.

From the realm of popular culture, I return in the fifth and final chapter to the literary, in a comparative analysis of two texts which I take to be paradigmatic, if contrasting, examples of the meta-black literary aesthetic in the contemporary moment, Percival Everett's 2009 novel, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, and Claudia Rankine's 2014 poetry collection, *Citizen*. Aside from their formal differences (which are not as different as they might appear, in the challenges each author poses to their respective literary genre), viewed together, these two texts make clear both the possibilities and the pitfalls of the meta-black moment, and the struggle to balance the performative agency to be found in "playing" with black identity with the embodied material consequences that accompany living as a subject visually raced as black in 21st century America.

I counter prevailing criticism of Everett's work that emphasizes his radical individualism, and locate a streak of pragmatic collectivism in regards to racial identity. Where many similarly postmodernist writings lapse into nihilistic solipsism and lack identifiable characters, there is something about Everett's protagonist (a young man named Not Sidney Poitier who, by all accounts, looks just like Sidney Poitier) that rings indelibly true. Taking theoretical cues from Du Bois's notion of "second-sight" (10), and Samuel Delany's conception of race as a "socio-visual system" (393), as well as from Jean Baudrillard's theories on postmodern simulation, I examine the ways that race as visual signifier functions in the novel, building to the claim that Everett, taking into account the profound ways that mass-mediated communications technologies have changed the way we "see" the world around us, elaborates in his novel a meta-black mode of identity. In creating this character who must, by virtue of his name and appearance, constantly identify himself in opposition to the archetypal and iconic figure

of Sidney Poitier, Everett reveals a profound truth about how African American identity is articulated in the 21st century. In a society saturated with mass-mediated iconography and stereotypes of blackness, black peoples in America must, to a great extent, perform their individual subjectivities within and against these spectacles of blackness.

But where Everett seems to me to locate at least some amount of hopeful agency in the play to be had in the “break” (to use Fred Moten’s term) between blackness as lived experience and “Blackness” writ large, Rankine focuses in *Citizen* on the ways that living in this break can physically break one down. Rankine, like Everett, incorporates visual media into her writing, and like Everett, she heavily references popular culture, in part to show the inextricability of blackness as lived experience and as it circulates in mass-mediated form. I read *Citizen* here as a sort of post-Ferguson companion piece to *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, observing the material, embodied toll that the micro-aggressions exacted by interpersonal interactions and macro-aggressions faced in the mass cultural sphere take on the black body. Specifically, I examine Rankine’s meta-black play with the poetic convention of the lyric “I” to create a trans-subjective poetic voice that speaks to the complex, contradictory, simultaneously embodied and disembodied nature of living as black in the 21st century.

An examination of these two texts together provides some critical insight into current debates between so-called Black Optimists and Afro-Pessimists, even if it cannot resolve this dichotomy entirely. In a largely favorable review of Touré’s *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness*, sociologist (and Afro-Pessimist scholar) Orlando Patterson, finds that one of the significant problems with Touré’s argument is that at points, “what constitutes post-black identity turn out to be nothing more than the shared experience of living with,

and overcoming, lingering old-fashioned racism, of learning to ignore the white gaze, along with the added burden of disregarding the censoring black one.” Patterson compares this to Alan Dershowitz’s “Tsuris Theory of Jewish Survival,” in which, as Patterson puts it, “assimilated American Jews desperately need external troubles and imagined enemies to maintain their identity.” This is a powerful critique, not just of the concept of “post-blackness,” but potentially, of the viability of maintaining any kind of coherent black identity in the contemporary moment.

However, part of the argument I make in the following pages for a meta-black aesthetic aims to trouble Patterson’s formulation of Dershowitz’s argument when applied to African American identity, and I find that both Everett’s novel and Rankine’s collection of poetry, in their own distinct ways, exemplify this troubling. First, both Rankine and Everett draw the “external” nature of the troubles faced by African Americans into question. Both problematize easy distinctions between external and internal, and demonstrate the ways in which the “external” becomes very much “internalized” when it comes to racial micro- and macro-aggressions. And secondly, I think that both authors’ “meta-” approach to blackness undermine conceptions of the enemies faced by black Americans as “imagined.” Certainly, the “Blackness” as circulated in mass-mediated culture that I discuss is “imaginary” in the sense that it is composed of simulacra of blackness; however, these simulacra have material effects. Part of the reason why I include a theorist as difficult and abstruse as Jean Baudrillard is for his important observation that in the contemporary moment, easy binaries between reality and simulation have become increasingly unsustainable. Breaking down some of these sorts of binaries as they relate to black identity, the meta-black aesthetic of the artists I

examine, culminating in the work of Everett and Rankine, reveals the ways that black lives as lived experiences matter, but also that “Blackness” as it circulates in the culture surrounding us is a “real” piece of these lived experiences, and thus matters in its own important ways.

## CHAPTER 1

### **BLACKNESS IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION: MUSIC AND THE PHONO/GRAPHIC SELF IN W.E.B. DU BOIS'S *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK* AND JAMES WELDON JOHNSON'S *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLORED MAN***

#### **Introduction: Transcribing the Untranscribable**

The use of music in the early twentieth-century writings of James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois is an important precursor to the meta-black aesthetic I locate in the work of Ralph Ellison and other African American cultural producers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Given the prominence that Johnson and Du Bois afforded to the black musical tradition in their writing and the sheer volume of critical commentary on their uses of music, this connection may seem obvious. However, to link Du Bois and Johnson's literary invocations of the black musical tradition to meta-blackness's playful engagement with popularly circulating, mass mediated stereotypes of blackness is to shift the critical paradigm of previous work on music in these authors' oeuvre. Situated as both authors were as important figureheads in the uplift movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they both evince a strong concern with promoting themselves as "representative" figures of black masculinity, and of promoting versions of black identity that would positively "represent" and uplift the race as a whole. That is to say, both men were cognizant of the high stakes inherent in representing blackness in their social and historical milieus, and thus, "playful" would likely not be the first word to come to mind to describe either writer.

Kevin Gaines describes the historical context for uplift ideology:



Against the post-Reconstruction assault on black citizenship and humanity, black ministers, intellectuals, journalists, and reformers sought to refute the view that African Americans were biologically inferior and unassimilable by incorporating “the race” into ostensibly universal but deeply racialized ideological categories of Western progress and civilization. Generally, black elites claimed class distinctions, indeed, the very existence of a ‘better class’ of blacks, as evidence of what they called race progress. Believing that the improvement of African Americans’ material and moral condition through self-help would diminish white racism, they sought to rehabilitate the race’s image by embodying respectability, enacted through an ethos of service to the masses. (xiv)

Du Bois, with his notion of the “talented tenth,”<sup>i</sup> and Johnson, with his emphasis on combining black folk musical expression with the Western classical tradition, adhered in many ways to this paternalistic, class-conscious, and often self-serious version of uplift.<sup>ii</sup> So what connects them to the contemporary meta-blackness that I observe in Ellison, Louis Armstrong, Percival Everett, Claudia Rankine, the hip hop aesthetic, and others? First, the uplift movement’s very concern with *representations* of blackness--the way these representations circulate in the popular imaginary--constitutes the origins of the contemporary mode of blackness that I observe. For African Americans in the early twentieth century, the incorporation of mass communications technologies such as the phonograph and film into print and photographic modernity were fundamentally altering the very nature of subjectivity generally, and black subjectivity in particular. As Gaines writes, “Mass-media technologies and industries provided new, more powerful ways of

telling the same old stories of black deviance and pathology . . . [H]owever, . . . at the same time mass-culture industries provided opportunities for black cultural production, the construction, or reconstruction, of black consciousness, and further struggle and contestation over representations of race” (xvi).

Du Bois and Johnson were very cognizant of the double-edged nature of technological modernity’s effects on their representations of blackness, and their invocations of music, in particular Du Bois’s use of the Sorrow Songs and of the Fisk University Singers in *The Souls of Black Folk* and Johnson’s discussions of (and participation in) ragtime in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and elsewhere, reflect attempts to negotiate this shift in modern black subjectivity. Both understood that in the twentieth century, more than ever before, to be black meant to engage with popularly circulated notions of the meaning of “blackness,” or as Du Bois puts it in his famous notion of double consciousness, to always be “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (11). Du Bois of course referred to a measuring tape, but as the twentieth century progressed, this world’s “tape” increasingly becomes the tape on which sounds and images of blackness are written, recorded, re-recorded, and sampled.

Both Du Bois and Johnson situate themselves and their writings at this quintessentially modern juncture of reproduction and reality. And the intersection of the improvised and the inscribed also becomes critical to their work as it relates to their use of black music. The dichotomy is often posed, by those in and outside of the black community during this time (and beyond), between “authentic” black music as improvisatory and spontaneous, and “inauthentic” black music as that which is

reproduced, inscribed in the form of sheet music, or later, on record. These binaries are further linked to stereotypical notions of black music as somehow inborn, more spontaneous, and more associated with the body than Western music, which by contrast is often connected with rigorous training and the intellect.

Du Bois and Johnson trouble these binaries, however, and I describe their approach as “phono/graphic.” I insert the slash in “phono/graphic” not only to distinguish my use of the term slightly from scholars like Katherine Biers and Alexander Weheliye who have analyzed both authors in relation to phonographic technologies, but also to emphasize the work that Du Bois and Johnson do in this “break,” where the phonic and the graphic, and improvisation/performance and inscription/reproduction meet.<sup>iii</sup> I find this break between the phonic and the graphic to be further productive in examining Johnson and Du Bois, because both authors’ incorporations of music in their writing belie a concern with the seeming freedom offered in the realm of the aural from the visual subjection of being raced as black in the twentieth century. Much existing scholarship reads both authors’ employment of the trope of music as representing a striving towards the freedom offered by the aural and an “escape” from the bodily.<sup>iv</sup> I am more interested, however, in the ways that each tries to articulate a black subjectivity that takes advantage of these freedoms of the aural without losing sight of the important embodied reality of living as black in the material world.

Because after all, both authors, even as they gesture towards these ineffable qualities of music, continue to attempt to record these qualities on the page, to transcribe the untranscribable. Despite not knowing the meaning of its words, Du Bois transcribes the bars and lyrics of the old African song he recalls his grandmother singing to the page,

and while Johnson describes a tendency in his early piano playing to frustrate his teacher's attempts to "[pin] me down to the notes" (8), the improvisatory approach to music that he develops has a dialectical relationship to the written notes on the page. Thus, the insertion of the slash in "phono/graphic" additionally underlines my use of Hegelian sublation to describe a process by which Du Bois and Johnson labor to employ music in their writing in such a way that these binaries are not smoothly merged, but are instead preserved in tension.<sup>v</sup> Both writers' engagements with these tensions, and particularly with the relationship between representations of blackness and lived black experience, are what leads me to claim their uses of music in their writing to be precursors to the meta-black aesthetic that I observe in more contemporary black cultural producers.

Bringing the phonograph (and the intersection of the phonic and the graphic) into analyses of Du Bois and Johnson underscores the fact that this technology was likely on their minds because such reproductions and representations were increasingly prevalent and even unavoidable. Thus, when I call their writing "phono/graphic," I am not claiming that the authors were consciously trying to mimic the phonograph in their writing; instead, I find that the two men's writing reflects and outlines widespread vernacular strategies for living as black in an increasingly phonographic world--one in which reproduction and commodification become unavoidable. So one important challenge that their work rises to meet is the need for black writers and artists to seize control of these circulating representations--recognizing that these representations are not going away, both authors adopt strategies to attempt to work within and against them. Both Du Bois and Johnson were very much engaged with these changes in how black subjectivity could

be expressed and lived in a phonographic age, and as such, both were very concerned with controlling how black music and black identity were *represented* in American mass culture.

Both authors' concerns with those discursive spaces where the aural and the inscribed, and the abstract realm of the musical and the fixed realm of the readable textual (and physical) body meet, echo early twentieth-century anxieties around folklorists' written transcriptions of black music. They also echo anxieties that arise with the emergent recording industry and its inscription, reproduction, and distribution of black music. Then as now, much was at stake in the control of these representations: the collection, transcription, reproduction, and commodification of black music by white folklorists and popular entertainers was a significant part of the background upon which Du Bois and Johnson signified<sup>vi</sup> in their writing. As the phonograph came into widespread use during this time, Du Bois and Johnson employed strategies in their writing that express these anxieties over reality and reproduction, and "live" performance and inscription, that characterize the rise of the phonograph.

In what follows, then, I will show the strategies that each author employed to proactively take control of how black people and black music would be represented and circulated in an age of mass audiovisual reproduction. Both authors, in their use of black music in their writing, work towards a complex means of sublating the dialectic between notions of black music as an untranscribable "authentic" folk tradition, and the emerging recording industry and its inscribed representations of this music as inherently corrupting. Du Bois's use of the Sorrow Songs in *The Souls of Black Folk* counters nostalgic work on black music by folklorists of his time (and critical treatments of Du Bois which belie a

similar nostalgia). I will examine his invocation of the Jubilee Singers and their performance, demonstrating their influence on the form of Du Bois's text, and also his notion of a black musical labor that could be put to work in the world. In the case of Johnson, he follows in part from Du Bois in this use of music, but with an added embrace of the popular, ragtime music in particular. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* begins to articulate a black subjectivity that acknowledges the complex reality of technological modernity that living in a body raced as black involves interacting with the body of simulated sounds, images, and stereotypes of blackness being reproduced and sold for profit in the sphere of popular culture. I will show this through analysis of Johnson's use of and participation in ragtime and in an analysis of the genre of ragtime itself as existing at the juncture of improvised performance and inscription. I will also look at the complex and carefully orchestrated publication history of the novel as a means by which Johnson troubles essentializing stereotypical representations of blackness. I wouldn't claim that Du Bois or Johnson's work is "meta-black," exactly; however, in their engagement with black music as it was being performed and circulated in the early twentieth century, and in their uplift concern with how blackness was being represented in popular culture in the phonographic era, both provide important building blocks for a meta-black aesthetic.

### **The Sounds of Black Folk: Music and the Material in *The Souls of Black Folk***

Critics who claim that Du Bois privileged the aural primarily because it served as an escape from the visual subjection of embodied racialized identity fail to account for his phono/graphic uses of music in the text.<sup>vii</sup> These readings attribute to Du Bois a

perspective on black music aligned with the nostalgic, essentializing readings of nineteenth century folklorists. Du Bois worked from many of these folklorists' texts in composing *Souls*; however, he engages with them in a complex fashion that simultaneously privileges the Sorrow Songs' expressive power and troubles the depiction of black musical expression as inborn and untranscribable. Further, in his use of transcriptions from folklorists' collections of black music, he problematizes their attempts to "know" the black body through transcription. In Du Bois's incorporation of the Sorrow Songs in his written text, then, black music is not merely a means to escape confinement to the raced body. Instead, the bars of music effectively function as phono/graphic epigraphs, pointing up the potential of music to express the productive tensions between the phonic and the graphic and the material and the spiritual.

Du Bois's invocation of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers further demonstrates this drive to bridge the gap between the abstract spiritual power of the songs sung by the group and the material power of this music to be put to work in the world. In his intertextual structuring of *Souls*, Du Bois was influenced by the 1873 text, *The Jubilee Singers, and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars*. However, he was not only informed by the structure of that earlier text, but also by the dialectical relationship between art and commerce embodied by the performing singers themselves.

Du Bois's invocations of music in *Souls* reflect a nuanced sublation of sound and the written word, the "phonic" and the "graphic." Du Bois's treatment of this binary becomes evident when we place Du Bois's use of bars from black spirituals in the context of the work of nineteenth-century folklorists who made a cottage industry of collecting and transcribing black spirituals. Although Du Bois drew the transcriptions he used from

these works, his deployment of them in his text was more complex than a mere citation would imply. As Shamoan Zamir has noted, folklore studies in the late nineteenth century tended to seek “in folk culture a series of values to place in opposition to the materialism and technological rationality the folklorists took to be the dominant spirit of their age” (173). This “organicist nostalgia,” as Zamir terms it, characterizes nineteenth century folkloric work on slave spirituals that emphasizes slave music’s resistance to transcription using Western methods. Take, for instance, this claim in the 1867 text, *Slave Songs of the United States*, compiled by William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware and Lucy McKim Garrison, a work which Du Bois had read: “The voices of the colored people have a peculiar quality that nothing can imitate; and the intonations and delicate variations of even one singer cannot be reproduced on paper” (iv-v). Similarly, in his 1870 work, *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson locates in the African American spiritual “strange fulfillment of dreams of other days,” and finds it a “strange enjoyment . . . to be suddenly brought into the midst of a . . . world of unwritten songs” (197). There may be an element of truth to such statements of the untranscribable nature (using Western techniques) of the slave songs, and Du Bois himself echoes this sort of nostalgia in much of his treatment of the Sorrow Songs. However, to characterize Du Bois’s use of music and the aural in *Souls* as being estranged from the material world is to relegate African American musical expression to “other days” in a manner similar to these nostalgic nineteenth-century folklorists. The folklorists’ transcriptions of black music were in many ways essentially invested not only in primitivist nostalgia, but also in defining black difference itself.<sup>viii</sup>



However, by re-inscribing these musical texts (without their lyrics) and signifying on white transcriptions of the slave songs, Du Bois makes his own claim about the nature of black subjectivity. Rather than simply residing in a romanticized pre-literate past, and rather than existing solely as the “limit” of whiteness, it is deeply engaged with the material challenges facing people raced as black in the early twentieth century.<sup>ix</sup> This complex engagement with black music can be observed in a close reading of the musical bars heading the first chapter of *Souls*, taken from the song “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” This song, as the title implies, speaks of a failure to communicate, however Du Bois’s use of the song also refers in its subtext to a critical moment of musical expression and of the material consequences of Reconstruction. Du Bois drew the musical bars for *Souls* in large part from the 1874 collection *Hampton and its Students*, and in this collection, the entry for “Nobody knows de trouble I’ve Seen” is headed with a presumably true story. In the story, a general is preparing to address a group of freedmen to tell them of the government’s confiscation of their land, and “To prepare them to listen, he asked them to sing” (9). The crowd subsequently breaks into the spiritual, and according to the text, “The General was so affected by the plaintive melody, that he found it difficult to maintain his official dignity” (9). Du Bois had clearly read this story heading the song, as he repeats it in his explication of the spirituals in “The Sorrow Songs” (158). Thus, he seems, playing on the song’s title, to be troubling the ability to “know” the “body” by “seeing” it. And while his use of the anecdote regarding the General speaks to the ability of the aural to communicate in a metalinguistic manner across the color line, the material effects of Reconstruction remain important and present

because, as affected as the General may have been by the singing, the government presumably still confiscated the freedmen's land.

The bars of music with which Du Bois heads each chapter of *Souls* effectively function as phono/graphic epigraphs, highlighting music's expression of the productive tensions between the phonic and the graphic and the material and the spiritual. These are tensions which Du Bois found critical to his iteration of a twentieth century black subjectivity, and which he exemplifies in his invocation of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, as I will discuss.<sup>x</sup> Following from the subtle subtext of his use of "Nobody Knows" in his opening chapter, Du Bois's second chapter, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," functions as a tragic and ironic summation of the material shortcomings of Emancipation. An in-depth reading of each of the songs used by Du Bois and their commentaries on the text has been skillfully done by Eric Sundquist in *To Wake the Nations*, and so we need not go through the chapters individually here. For the purposes of this argument regarding Du Bois's phono/graphic use of music in the text, however, it makes sense to pause on the song that heads Du Bois's second chapter. The song, which Du Bois reveals in the final chapter as "My Lord, What a Mourning," was alternately transcribed as "mourning" and "morning." As Sundquist observes, the musical notes that Du Bois uses in the heading for the chapter are closest to those contained in *Hampton and its Students*, in which the song's title uses the "morning" spelling. Clearly, then, in a chapter in which Du Bois discusses the material failure of Reconstruction, this ambiguity of spelling is intentional, expressing the fact that, as Sundquist points out, "Reconstruction has turned out to be a false dawn" (498). However, Du Bois's dark play on words additionally expresses the difficulty of using the symbols of language to communicate the realities of Reconstruction. This

slippage of language in communicating the material is underlined in the chapter's text when he muses on the potential poetic justice of placing freed slaves on their masters' land, but ultimately notes the impossibility of seeing "this poetry done into solemn prose" (24). Du Bois goes on to acknowledge the veracity of both sides of the argument for and against the Freedmen's Bureau, observing that "These two arguments were unanswered, and indeed unanswerable" (25). Thus, Du Bois suggests that the prose of argumentative rhetoric and legislation is insufficient to address the material complexities of Reconstruction.

In these early chapters of *Souls*, Du Bois outlines the difficulty of communicating through written language and formal expository argument across the Veil. This difficulty comes not only between Du Bois and his audience, but also between Du Bois as a northern black man and black people living beyond the Veil in the south. This disconnect represents a larger divide between Du Bois himself and a coherent notion of black communal identity. Du Bois's fourth and fifth chapters represent something of a transitional section in the text in this sense, as he moves towards articulating a potential solution to this communicative dilemma in the spaces where the audible meets the transcribed. In these chapters, Du Bois describes himself as literally in transit, descending into the American South in the Jim Crow car of a train. And secondly, there are a number of instances in these chapters where Du Bois describes people and places as being somehow "in progress." For instance, in "Of the Meaning of Progress," Du Bois describes Josie, a young black woman with a budding "longing to know" as a "child-woman" (48), and he describes the "half-awakened thought" that she and some of his other pupils possess (51). He describes himself at this point in the text, having come to

Tennessee to teach, as not entirely of a piece with those beyond the veil, instead observing that “there was among us but a half-awakened common consciousness” (50). Even as he describes leaving the town, Du Bois finds himself in a liminal space, as neither a full adult nor a child. He writes, “The ten years that follow youth, the years when the first realization comes that life is leading somewhere,--these were the years that passed after I left my little school” (51).

Du Bois’s maturation is a piece of the transition of these middle chapters of *Souls*, as is his achievement of a greater feeling of unity with those living beyond the Veil, and thus with blackness as identity. Music and the aural are key to these transitions, but it is not music as a disembodied spiritual force, but rather music, as represented by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, as an embodied performance used to make material gains. He writes, “When they [the ten years marking the passage from childhood to manhood] were past, I came by chance once more to the walls of Fisk University, to the halls of the chapel of melody” (51). Du Bois again fuses education and music in the fifth chapter, where he describes a group of black students in Atlanta with an emphasis on the musicality of the everyday sounds of the school:

I can see the dark figures pass between the halls to the music of the night-bell. In the morning, when the sun is golden, the clang of the day-bell brings the hurry and laughter of three hundred young hearts from hall and street . . . to join their clear young voices in the music of the morning sacrifice. In a half-dozen classrooms they gather then,--here to follow the love-song of Dido. (58)

The connection of music and musicality to education in these two chapters is no accident. In his fifth chapter, Du Bois argues for the need to educate young African Americans not merely in a pragmatic fashion so that they can earn money, but also to give them an overall education founded on lofty ideals. As he writes, “the final product of our training must be neither a psychologist nor a brickmason, but a man” (61). Du Bois does not argue against practical or vocational education, but rather is trying again through his vision of education to sublate the dialectic between abstract and material realms. And once again, the embodied performance of music and sound provides him with a key link through which to express this sublation.

Du Bois’s interest in the power of music to sublate the dialectic between this world of ideals and a harsh material reality was not merely abstract. His positioning of the music of the Jubilee Singers as the primary example of African American musical expression in *Souls* provides a key to unlocking this more complex view of his invocations of music and sound in his writing, and his linking of music with the education of black people. The Jubilee Singers, touring first America and then Europe, raised over \$150,000 for Fisk University, where Du Bois received part of his education. Education was of course crucial to Du Bois’s vision of uplift, and we should note that his education was essentially made possible by the musical labor of the Jubilee Singers and the people who created the Sorrow Songs, a fact which Du Bois acknowledges in *Souls* when he writes, “To me Jubilee Hall seemed ever made of the songs themselves, and its bricks were red with the blood and dust of toil” (155). Making a further case for the Jubilee Singers’ influence on Du Bois, Paul Gilroy claims that Gustavus D. Pike’s 1873 text recounting the story of the singers, *The Jubilee Singers, and Their Campaign for*

*Twenty Thousand Dollars*, was an aesthetic inspiration for Du Bois in composing *Souls*. Pike's text is formally unique, combining a narrative of the group's first United States tour with personal histories of the singers and musical notations of the songs sung by the Jubilee Singers. Gilroy argues that "this unusual combination of communicative modes and genres is especially important for anyone seeking to locate the origins of the polyphonic montage technique developed by Du Bois" (89).

The music that the Jubilee Singers performed was a hybrid of European, African, and African American traditions, a hybrid which some, both during the nineteenth century and more recently, have claimed was fundamentally a debasement of African traditions. And indeed, if one subscribes to a binary mode of thinking that pits a Western, rationalized, profit-driven aesthetic against a wholly spontaneous, improvisatory African aesthetic that is not concerned with profit in this world, the Jubilee Singers' detractors may have a point. As indicated by its title, much of Pike's text dwells on the profits made by the group, and the stories of their travels focus far more on how they managed to obtain funding than on the concerts themselves. In a particularly revealing passage, Pike reveals that the group's focus on slave songs rather than more contemporary Western-influenced material was less a matter of aesthetics and more a matter of catering to their audience. Pike writes:

He [George L. White, the group's director] started North in '71 to sing the more difficult and popular music of the day, composed by our best native and foreign artists; but he found his well-disciplined choir singing the old religious slave songs, his audience demanding these, and satisfied with little besides. (47)

In addition to such admissions (and celebrations, really) of the profit motive undergirding the aesthetic of the Jubilee Singers, however, there are also passages which express the sort of nostalgic, essentialized idea of the African origins of the songs that the group's detractors would probably approve of. In his preface to the notation of the slave songs, Theo F. Seward writes of the songs:

They are never 'composed' after the manner of ordinary music, but spring into life, ready made, from the white heat of religious fervor during some protracted meeting in church or camp. They come from no musical cultivation whatever, but are the simple, ecstatic utterances of wholly untutored minds. (163)

Seward's description of the slaves' singing as uncultivated, "simple," and "wholly untutored," and also of the songs as "spring[ing] to life" with no labor required on the part of the singers, repeats essentializing stereotypes of black people as "naturally" and unreflectively musical.

Du Bois may have also been struck and influenced by the dialectical relationship between practical profit motives and idealized aesthetic intentions exemplified in the Jubilee Singers themselves. Rather than seeing this contradiction as inherently degrading the music and African American culture, Du Bois makes use of the hybridity of the Jubilee Singers and their music to sublate the aforementioned dialectic and model a way that an "authentic" blackness could be expressed in a world increasingly consumed with commerce and technological reproduction. Thus, to claim, as Houston Baker does, that in

*Souls*, “A black-bestowed definition, or *sounding*, offers the *only* promise of spirituality in a world increasingly moved by work and money” (67), is to at least partially miss Du Bois’s point. Du Bois saw music, and specifically the labor of making music as a key to bridging the gaps between Western and African culture. The hybridity of the Jubilee Singers allowed Du Bois to reconcile his own progressivist views on the development of culture with his feelings that there was some virtually indescribable “gift” to be found in the Sorrow Songs; it also helps him to elaborate a coherent vision of a twentieth century black communal identity.

Earlier, I noted Du Bois’s complex play on the title of the slave spiritual, “My Lord, What a Mourning!” In light of this punning, fraught as it is with weighty potential readings, it is notable that at the end of “The Sorrow Songs,” as Du Bois’s weary traveler is sent into the world by the spirituals, Du Bois returns to this homonymous pairing, but reverses the spelling. He writes, “the traveller girds himself, and sets his face toward the Morning, and goes his way” (164). Thus, we see a hope for the redemptive power of music and sound in the material world, and yet we are invited to be haunted by the fact that we know that Du Bois’s traveler is also in fact setting his face toward mourning the tragic losses suffered by the African American people. This morning/mourning pairing provides a telling example of what the sublation of the abstract and material that he finds in black music means for Du Bois. In the sounded word mourning/morning, ruination is pitted against redemption, conflict against communion, the grievance of material losses against a metaphysical hope for better days ahead. Preserving the tension inherent in these oppositions, Du Bois strives to locate in his phono/graphic textual strategy a “meta-” space for a modern twentieth century black identity; it is an elevated space above the



Veil where both the metaphysical and the material, the phonic and the graphic, can coexist without obliterating one another or merging in unproblematic synthesis.

And in his “After-Thought” concluding the text, Du Bois directly (and aurally) addresses his audience, asking “O God the Reader” to “Hear my cry” (164). He acknowledges the role that his reader’s interpretive work will play in the impact of his book and invokes the metaphor of a plant to describe the text’s cultural circulation, imploring, “Let there spring, Gentle One, from out of its leaves vigor of thought and thoughtful deed to reap the harvest wonderful” (164). This allusion to the natural, material world to describe the abstract effect of the circulation and impact of his written text, along with the pairings of words referring to the material and the abstract (“vigor of thought” and “thoughtful deed”) underline that for all of his progressivist idealism, Du Bois fundamentally recognized the fact that in the twentieth century, the modern black identity that he articulates will increasingly be lived in negotiation with the sphere of circulating culture. And in this cultural sphere, for Du Bois, both thought and deed, and thoughtful deeds, would have important roles to play in the fight to control representations of blackness in the phonographic age.

### **Ragging Blackness: Popular Music and Performance in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man***

It is well-established that James Weldon Johnson’s composition of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* was strongly influenced by Du Bois and his notion of double consciousness--*Souls of Black Folk* is in fact explicitly referenced in the novel. In addition to this influence, Johnson’s incorporation of black popular music into his text

represents a further development of Du Bois's phono/graphic approach to black musical expression. By making use of ragtime music and performance in his writing, and strategically publishing the novel, Johnson begins to articulate a mode of black subjectivity that embraces technological modernity, and the contradictions posed for black people in living amidst the often stereotypical sounds and images of blackness being circulated and sold in the popular cultural marketplace.

Before making a living as a writer in New York City, Johnson was a popular songwriter, and his work in this capacity with and against the minstrel tradition influences Johnson's motivation to engage in his writing with even the oftentimes hurtful images and sounds of blackness in the popular imaginary. Ragtime music itself is situated at the interstices of improvisation and inscription, of live performance and composition, and of "authentic" folk and commercial musical expressions, and these are binaries that Johnson uses the music to trouble. Invoking this hybrid musical form, he also sublates binaristic conceptions of black music and black identity as "natural" and more "embodied" than whiteness and the carefully composed Western musical tradition, stereotypes with which Du Bois was also concerned. Further, the publication history of the novel, originally published anonymously under the guise of a true story, allows Johnson to problematize essentializing conceptions of blackness, playing with white readers' desire to "know" black subjects and the black body.

While Du Bois's depiction of the Jubilee Singers belies a pragmatic appreciation for the compromises inherent in the labor of performing traditional black music for a popular audience, his feelings regarding popular culture were ambivalent, to put it kindly. James Weldon Johnson's literary career, on the other hand, effectively grew out of his

work with his brother Rosamond and Bob Cole as a ragtime songwriter and his participation in the cultural milieu of the “Black Bohemia” in New York City that prefigured the New Negro Renaissance in Harlem of the 1920s. Despite these seeming differences in their feelings towards popular music, Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* was perhaps the single biggest inspiration for Johnson’s *Autobiography*, and Johnson seems to have been particularly inspired by the place that Du Bois gives black music in his text. As Noelle Morrisette has observed, “What Du Bois had initiated through the spirituals as the basis of his work, Johnson took up in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as an even more broadly constituted concept of music and sound composition” (48-49). And following Du Bois, Johnson seems especially concerned in *The Autobiography* with the interstices of the aural and the inscribed, the “authentic” and the reproduced, which I have noted are characteristic of their “phono/graphic” approach to writing black music. For Johnson, this dialectic between sound and the written word is connected to tensions inherent in twentieth century black identity and culture--between notions of black identity as natural and connected to an “authentic” tradition located in the African past, and a modern black identity that is engaged with the images and sounds of blackness inscribed in the cultural imaginary. In his use of music, then, Johnson attempts to sublimate these tensions in order to open up possibilities for a black subjectivity that is simultaneously rooted in tradition and flexibly adaptive to the mass-mediated present.

Like Du Bois, Johnson took a somewhat paternalistic attitude towards black folk culture, and like him, he viewed it as his role to interpret and, as a songwriter, refine elements of folk culture, incorporating “high” and “low” cultures into a quintessentially

modern form of black musical expression. Describing this interpretive role, Johnson famously writes of the master musician/composer in *The Autobiography* (and repeats in his Preface to the 1922 *Book of American Negro Poetry*), “the best he gives the world he gathers from the hearts of his people, and runs it through the alembic of his genius” (62). The relationship Johnson outlines between the unconscious “heart” of the “people,” as opposed to the conscious brain of the “genius” is in some ways characteristic of his own and Du Bois’s versions of an uplift ideology.

Despite sharing Du Bois’s somewhat patronizing attitude towards folk musical culture, Johnson breaks with his dismissive attitude toward popular culture. While Johnson, like Du Bois and most proponents of uplift, was concerned with counteracting the harmful stereotypes of blackness circulating in the popular imaginary, as a writer who cut his teeth (and made a living in the early twentieth century) writing ragtime songs and musicals that played within and against this minstrel tradition, Johnson saw the necessity of engaging with representations of blackness as they circulate in the realm of popular culture. Because in that Preface to the *Book of American Negro Poetry*, Johnson acknowledges that “the status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race than of actual conditions” (9). Such an acknowledgment might seem trivial, but when Johnson states that a significant piece of the problem of the American color line lies in the realm of the imaginary, and that the most effective means of counteracting these mental attitudes will be the “demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art” (9), he implies the importance of culture for his version of uplift.

Of course, one could read Johnson here as advocating for the demonstration of black intellectual parity through the composition of “high” culture such as classical music. And he would certainly have encouraged that sort of expression by African American artists. However, Johnson goes further to imply that this demonstration of intellectual parity might in fact arise from the black folk tradition when he argues that African Americans are the “creator[s] of the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil” (10). Of the four artistic productions he cites, it is notable that all include an element of strategic signification on American preconceptions of African American culture. First, Johnson cites the slave spirituals, fusions of African and white Christian spiritual traditions, but which were often used by slaves to communicate hidden messages to one another under the guise of religious worship. He also cites the Uncle Remus stories, which prominently feature trickster characters who play on assumptions of their ignorance to gain desired outcomes. Thirdly, he brings up the cakewalk, in which slaves would mock their white masters’ style of dance, mockery that whites typically mistook as flattery or incompetence. And finally, Johnson invokes ragtime, a form of music that Johnson himself had played a significant part in developing and transcribing for twentieth century audiences. Discussing he and his songwriting team’s approach to ragtime, Johnson describes how they “appropriated about the last one of the old ‘jes’ grew’ songs” (13), and re-wrote it into the song that would become “Oh, Didn’t He Ramble!”

This technique of “appropriating” folk songs and rewriting and transcribing them as ragtime pieces for popular consumption was a practical means of making a living as a songwriter and musician. As Shana Redmond notes, for black artists in New York City in the early twentieth century like Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Bert Williams and

George Walker, invoking black folk music as an inspiration for their compositions could be a means of developing “multidimensional representations of black people to compete with the primitivist, native, and minstrel stereotypes that characterized American popular theater and culture” (74). And for these artists, attempting to earn a living as professional musicians and entertainers, competing with these stereotypes necessarily meant making use of them to undermine them. Morrisette argues that “Cole and Johnson Brothers walked a fine line, unsettling the prevailing taste for the racist stereotyping of the minstrel show with bold, innovative compositions that mocked American jingoism while exploiting the perceived exoticism of African and ‘other’ cultures of darker complexion” (9), and Redmond claims that “these compositions and performances created a bridge between the quotidian and the utopian for Black citizens” (74). Such characterizations cut to the heart of what Johnson labors to accomplish in his musical compositions of the early twentieth century, and also in his novel, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, originally published anonymously in 1912. And further, the dichotomy that Redmond posits between the utopian and the quotidian proves to be intimately linked, for Johnson, to that between the phonic and the graphic, and the role of popular music in sublating these polarities. By thus using ragtime in the text, Johnson begins to articulate a mode of black subjectivity that acknowledges the complexity of technological modernity, where living materially in a body raced as black involves interacting with the body of simulated sounds, images, and stereotypes of blackness being reproduced and sold for profit in the sphere of popular culture.

In his early invocations of music throughout the novel, Johnson repeatedly juxtaposes the written word and music. Describing his early childhood, Johnson writes,

“for a couple years my life was divided between my music and my school books” (7). Indeed, almost every mention of music while describing his childhood is preceded or followed by a reference to books. He describes being driven to both books and music as a result of his learning of his blackness (in a scene of initiation that bears striking similarities to Du Bois’s in *Souls*): “There were two immediate results of my forced loneliness: I began to find company in books, and greater pleasure in music” (15). The fact that Johnson’s narrator links his immersion in books and music to his coming into racial consciousness suggests that a part of what he finds in both is an escape from the bodily reality of his racial identity; as he puts it, “I dwelt in a world of imagination, of dreams and air castles” (30). This desire to escape from the realm of the body to that of the mind is frequently expressed in African American literature and culture; it is a reaction not only to the fact of racialized black bodies being used as justification for the practices of segregation and white supremacy, but also to discursive representations of black peoples that figured them as living a more “physical,” “natural,” or “instinctive” existence than whites. This image of the African American as excessively physical, with the black male displaying brute strength and threatening sexual potency, and the black female seen alternately as sexually promiscuous and maternally nurturing, is of course a well-known stereotype, and it is one that has proven especially persistent, amongst even the most well-intentioned thinkers, black and white alike. It is found not only in folklorists’ writings on black music, as I demonstrated in my analysis of Du Bois, but also in the oft-observed tendency towards primitivism of modernist writers and artists of the early twentieth century, who figured black people as offering by way of their

physicality a welcome respite from the alienating and dehumanizing aspects of modern society.

For many African American artists and thinkers, music seemed to be one mode of escaping the body, and Johnson's descriptions of music's role in his childhood seem to express this sense of possibility for escape. As I have noted, many critics have interpreted both Du Bois and Johnson's employment of music in their written texts in this vein.<sup>xi</sup>

However, a transition seems to occur in Johnson's descriptions of music when he encounters the quintessentially modern ragtime music. The first time he hears ragtime music played, he describes it in physical terms: "It was music that demanded physical response, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers, or nodding of the head in time with the beat" (60). By describing black music in this way, Johnson seems to be flipping from one binary, music as escape from physical reality, to another, music (and black music in particular) as inherently physical. Johnson might seem here to be playing into that longstanding strain of thought which, stemming from the aforementioned primitivism, generalizes black music to be an inborn trait, associated with natural affinity and the body rather than learned study. And indeed, describing ragtime, Johnson writes that the music's black originators "knew no more of the theory of music than they did of the theory of the universe, but were guided by natural musical instinct and talent" (61).

This sort of primitivism when discussing black music extends beyond Johnson's time, and beyond the literary and popular spheres to inflect contemporary discussions and academic writing on the subject of black music.<sup>xii</sup> The "folkloric paradigm," as Karl Hagstrom Miller terms it, describes how early folklorists and musicologists effectively wrote racial difference into academic histories of American music. I have noted this



tendency among the folklorists of Du Bois's time, but it also crops up in the works of more contemporary writers on black music.<sup>xiii</sup> It seems a reasonable question, then, to ask to what extent these contemporary sorts of arguments about black music are underwritten by a naturalizing assumption of racial and cultural distance, and to what extent they participate in treating as natural a separation which, while it may have been institutionalized by Jim Crow policies and (concerning black music specifically) the race record industry, has been repeatedly proven to have no reality in biology. Few if any critics today would argue for the biological reality of race, and this institutionalized separation of black and white in Jim Crow America has had real effects on the levels of culture and material reality. And few, myself included, would argue that a black American cultural and musical tradition does not exist. However, by portraying black music as being somehow more physical than Euro-American musical traditions, arguments that continue this folkloric paradigm are inadequate to explain the evolution of black musical style in conjunction with emerging technologies. By focusing myopically on an "authentic" and somehow more "human" folk, they diminish the ways that the black musical aesthetic has developed along with technological advances including those made by black producers (as Hagstrom Miller points out), as well as potentially overlooking the communicative capacity of mass-mediated music. And it is exactly this phono/graphic development of a black musical aesthetic that is very much "modern" and engaged with technology and the popular marketplace that Johnson articulates in *The Autobiography*.

Many critics writing on Johnson seem to read his use of music in the novel as following this "folkloric paradigm." Mark Goble, for example, argues that "In the media

ecology of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, writing is effectively a racial attribute of whiteness” (180), and that in contrast, “the novel and its narrator, from the start, align the aesthetic power of blackness with the sensuous, spontaneous immediacy of music” (181). But notwithstanding Johnson’s lapses into primitivism, it is the synergistic convergences of black musical aesthetics and technological developments, and the sublation of the phonic and the graphic, that Johnson’s narrator, as he becomes a ragtime composer and musician himself, concerns himself with throughout the novel. While Johnson certainly does engage with seeming oppositions such as writing and music, literacy and orality, composition and improvisation, and the intellectual and the physical, given his affinity for and participation in ragtime, equating blackness in Johnson’s text solely with the “sensuous” and “spontaneous” is simplistic.

Ragtime’s popular explosion relied on the technology of the phonograph (and also on the written scores composed by songwriters like Cole and Johnson Brothers--in the ragtime era, in fact, these transcribed scores were where the most money was being made). Emerging during this phonographic era, the music itself occupies a liminal space between the phonic and the graphic. As Katherine Biers observes of ragtime, “It was born with the Edison phonograph, which also made sonic materiality audible by reproducing sound in the absence of text or written score” (100). Ingeborg Harer further argues, “The genre of ragtime must be defined according to its duality between written music and oral tradition, between early jazz and classical music, and between African American and European American music” (97). Additionally, ragtime relies on a meta- signification on not only black folk culture, but also blackness as it circulates in the popular imaginary, often through harmful stereotypes. Ragtime composers and artists engaged, out of

necessity, with this painful history. As Schaefer and Riedel point out, “when black ragtime departed from the popular line of the ‘coon song’ and the grotesque dances of the minstrel show, it carried with it a built-in freight of this racism and the concomitant myth of the Old South, so that even the work of serious black artists partakes of the idiotic paraphernalia and terminology of the minstrel show” (17).

Idiotic as these remnants of minstrel show culture may have been and continue to be, these artists engaged with blackness as discursive cultural trope in order to make a material living and, with varying degrees of success, to prevent black music from being entirely pillaged by white profiteers. Johnson points out this tendency, and the black response to it, in the *Autobiography* when he writes, “Several of these improvisations [black-composed ragtime songs] were taken down by white men, the words slightly altered, and published under the names of the arrangers. They sprang into immediate popularity and earned small fortunes, of which the Negro originators got only a few dollars” (61). Truly a tale as old as time, but Johnson outlines how some of his contemporaries responded: “I have learned that since that time a number of colored men, of not only musical talent, but training, are writing their own melodies and words and reaping the reward of their work” (61). Johnson’s narrator (and Johnson himself) follows this model for musical success, complementing the abstract and seemingly “natural” (talent) with material labor (training), and inflecting his embodied performance with intellectual savvy regarding the machinations of the modern music industry.

The narrator himself, performing ragtime music, becomes a conductive site for these sorts of polarities as the novel goes on, and in doing so, models a nascent iteration of the modern, meta- approach to black cultural identity. As the narrator becomes a

skilled ragtime musician, he recounts that, “By mastering ragtime I gained several things; first of all, I gained the title of professor. . . . Then, too, I gained the means of earning a rather fair livelihood” (70). Coupling this nickname with a reference to his material earnings through music demonstrates the dichotomy that the narrator sublates through ragtime performance: he becomes esteemed as an intellectual, a “professor,” but rather than residing strictly in the world of the intellect, he is able to parlay that knowledge and esteem into financial gain. Johnson also describes his character as occupying a liminal space between high and low culture. He notes, “It was I who first made ragtime transcriptions of familiar classic selections” (70), and he cites Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March” as one such selection. In ragging the “Wedding March,” the narrator weds Western classical music with ragtime improvisation, but it is important to note that his playing is not entirely improvisatory; rather, he “transcribes” the song into a ragtime mode, putting it to the page. At the first hired event he plays for his unnamed musical benefactor, he begins by playing classical music, but eventually plays his “Wedding March” rag, and as he plays, “the whole company involuntarily and unconsciously did an impromptu cake-walk” (72).

His dancing audience at this event is never explicitly described as white. While the narrator’s description of the event (“I saw that I was in the midst of elegance and luxury in a degree as I had never seen” (71)), and its attendees (“These were people . . . who were ever expecting to find happiness in novelty, each day restlessly exploring and exhausting every resource of this great city that might possibly furnish a new sensation or awaken a fresh emotion” (72)) might lead readers to assume the whiteness of the audience, the fact that the narrator never mentions it is significant in a novel so concerned

with blurring the lines of racial identity. That this audience presumed (in part through the lens of stereotype) to be white ends up dancing “involuntarily” and “unconsciously” (stereotypes, as previously noted, associated with black people), and that they are doing a cakewalk, a dance wherein black slaves would perform exaggerated and mocking imitations of their white masters, all adds to the layers of racial ambiguity that Johnson aims to create in the novel. And it is the narrator’s ragtime transcription and performance, which he describes in decidedly technical terms (he recounts playing it with “terrific chromatic octave runs over the base”) (72), that creates this blurring of the lines between black and white, high and low culture, and the composed and improvisatory.

As he travels with his benefactor throughout Europe, playing along the way for various audiences, the narrator shifts his focus from ragging classical songs to adapting African American slave songs to the ragtime form. After leaving the country, the ex-colored man begins to long for an authentically black identity which, he believes, resides in the South: “I made up my mind to go back into the very heart of the South, to live among the people, and drink in my inspiration firsthand. I gloated over the immense amount of material I had to work with, not only modern ragtime, but also the old slave songs,--material which no one had yet touched” (85). Here, the narrator describes black culture in physical terms, as “material” that can be consumed (“drink in”), and that he can “touch.” As he informs his benefactor of his decision to leave Europe and venture to the South, his benefactor is unhappy, and tries to talk the narrator out of it. By doing so, he invokes the dichotomy between the material and the social to describe the black identity that the narrator aspires to and the forces of prejudice at play in the United States, telling the narrator, “look at the terrible handicap you are placing on yourself by going home and

working as a Negro composer,” and warning that “This idea you have of making a Negro out of yourself is nothing more than a sentiment” (86). He goes on to caution, “They [black people in America] are unfortunate in having wrongs to right, and you would be foolish to unnecessarily take their wrongs on your shoulders. Perhaps some day, through study and observation, you will come to see that evil is a force and, like the physical and chemical forces, we cannot annihilate it; we can only change its form” (87). The benefactor argues, in effect, that racial identity is socially constructed (“nothing more than a sentiment”), while acknowledging the material burdens of being black in America. The benefactor thus raises the pragmatic question of why, given the imagined nature of racial identity, the narrator would willingly take this burden, physically, upon his shoulders.

The man’s speech causes the narrator to do some soul-searching, and he notes, “I suffered more than one sleepless night during that time” (88). But while he admits that the question of his motives in going to the South “is a question I have never definitely answered,” he ultimately seems to come to a sort of resolution in which he conceptualizes both blackness as identity and racial prejudice as simultaneously materially real and culturally reproduced, and as such, begins to develop a strategy whereby both can be *used*. He finally concludes that “music offered me a better future than anything else I had any knowledge of, and, in opposition to my friend’s opinion, that I should have greater chances of attracting attention as a colored composer than as a white one” (88). The narrator acknowledges that this resolution rests “on purely selfish grounds,” but goes on to say that “I must own that I also felt stirred by an unselfish desire to voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classical music form”

(88). Johnson's narrator here is grappling with the central question upon which the meta-black aesthetic is premised: is it possible to balance a notion of blackness as shared identity and cultural heritage (and shared oppression) with the individualist urge to pursue one's identity outside of the constraints of prescriptive bounds of racial identity? We do not find any definitive resolutions to this dilemma in Johnson's text, but he does seem to articulate in his narrator's musical aesthetic a means by which the skillful black performer might navigate racial prejudice, in its materially violent and its mass-mediated forms.

Before the ex-colored man even reaches the South, he encounters a black man aboard his ship bound for New York City who seems to metaphorize his changing conception of the concomitantly real and ethereal nature of racial identity. He describes the man initially as almost literally larger than life: "Among the first of my fellow passengers of whom I took particular notice, was a tall, broad-shouldered, almost gigantic, colored man" (89). At first, the man is depicted as fitting stereotypes of black masculinity as excessively physical. Johnson writes that the man "compelled admiration for his fine physical proportions" (89). But as the narrator gets to know the man, he defies the stereotypes implied by his physicality. The ex-colored man learns that the man was born in slavery and had worked to become a physician. The man also relates to the narrator an interesting pragmatic philosophy on the nature of racial prejudice. When the ex-colored man points out that a white man who had sat next to the black man in the ship's dining area earlier in the trip asked the steward to be moved from the seat and even attempted to organize other passengers to protest the black man's presence in the dining room, the black man responds, "the man you are speaking of had a perfect right to change

his seat if I in any way interfered with his appetite or his digestion” (89). He continues, “but when his prejudice attempts to move *me*, one foot, one inch, out of the place where I am comfortably located, then I object” (89-90). The narrator emphasizes the word “object” by noting that “On the word ‘object’ he brought his great fist down on the table in front of us with such a crash that everyone in the room turned to look” (90). Here, Johnson returns to a description of the man’s physicality, but in this instance, the physicality is being used in the service of demanding dignity. The black man is no longer a physical object; rather he physically *objects*, and by objecting demands a recognition of his subjectivity.

Johnson’s narrator travels with the man as far as Washington, and there learns quite a bit from him about intra-racial prejudice. The narrator notes that “Washington shows the Negro not only at his best, but also at his worst,” and the doctor laments to the narrator that “a dozen loafing darkies make a bigger crowd and a worse impression in this country than fifty white men of the same class. But they ought not to represent the race. We are the race, and the race ought to be judged by us, not them” (92-93). Of course, this focus on representing the race and the desire for the race to be judged by its most talented class is very much in keeping with uplift ideology, but it additionally serves as a recognition of the outsized role that stereotype and perception play in racial prejudice, a reality which the ex-colored man is learning to navigate.

The ex-colored man’s foray into the South is relatively short-lived. He spends some time in the South, “jotting down in my note-book themes and melodies, and trying to catch the spirit of the Negro in his relatively primitive state” (102). But perhaps as interesting as what he does record in his notebooks is what he chooses not to, noting that



much of what he saw of black life in the South “does not require description at my hands; for log cabins and plantations and dialect-speaking darkies are perhaps better known in American literature than any other single picture of our national life. Indeed, they form an ideal and exclusive literary concept of the American Negro” (99). He compares the plight of black people in America to “a great comedian who gives up the lighter roles to play tragedy,” arguing, essentially, that black people in American culture have been typecast, which is to say “read” by white people in a particular way no matter the black subject’s intention. He does point out that “this very fact constitutes the opportunity of the future Negro novelist and poet to give the country something new and unknown in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggling, and the passions of those of their race who are striving to break the narrow limits of traditions” (100).

Johnson’s narrator manages to observe some black Southern culture before witnessing a lynching drives him to abandon his plan of documenting African American folk music and return to New York City. The primary representatives, or “types,” that he cites are two men he sees at a revival meeting, a preacher named John Brown, and a singer known as “Singing Johnson” (103). In describing the rhetorical power of these two men, Johnson again dwells on the intersections between sound and the visual, the the improvisatory and the composed. He describes Brown as “a jet black man of medium size, with a strikingly intelligent head and face, and a voice like an organ peal” (104). The initial stress on the fact of his physical blackness is modified with the description of the physical characteristics of his head and face as “strikingly intelligent.” Johnson also likens his voice to an organ, linking the aurality of the human voice with a material, mechanized musical instrument. And he further stresses the intersections of sight and

sound in describing the power of Brown's sermons, noting that "eloquence consists more in the manner of saying than in what is said. It is largely a matter of tone pictures" (104). This idea of the rhetorical power of the aural as a "matter of tone pictures" is illustrative of the phono/graphic, synaesthetic sublation of the aural and the visual, and of sound and text, that Johnson develops over the course of the novel.

Once the ex-colored man is driven by the spectacle of a lynching back to the North, he makes the choice to live as a white man. Or, rather, he chooses not to object when he is taken as a white man. As Johnson writes: "I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a mustache, and let the world take me for what it would" (113). He devotes himself to making money, and does fairly well; his identity only causes him a problem when he falls in love with a white woman and has to decide whether or not to tell her the truth about who he is. He finally decides to tell her, and a love affair which had until then resided primarily in the idealistic realm of the aural (he relates that "we were drawn together a great deal by the mutual bond of music" (119)) is cruelly returned to the realm of the bodily, the narrator fixed and primitivized in the white gaze. He tells her his secret as he plays the "13th Nocturne" for her on the piano, and afterwards, "when I looked up she was gazing at me with a wild, fixed stare as though I was some object she had never seen. Under the strange light in her eyes I felt that I was growing black and thick-featured and crimp-haired" (121). The narrator actually feels that his physical appearance is changing, that he is becoming stereotypically "black" under her gaze, recalling the "phenomenological return" that George Yancy describes black bodies undergoing in the white gaze "that leaves it distorted and fixed as a pre-existing essence"

(2). She then, without discussing her feelings regarding his racial identity, leaves for a summer, and upon her return they slowly rekindle the love affair, which is “consummated” as the pair again play the “13th Nocturne” together at the piano. He notes that he “involuntarily closed” the piece, written in C minor, “with the major triad” (124), improvising a happy ending to a melancholy composition.

The ending of the novel, of course, cannot be read as simply “happy.” The couple are married for a “few years,” and have a daughter and then a son; his wife dies giving birth to the son. He describes devoting the rest of his life to his children, stating that “there is nothing that I would not suffer to keep the ‘brand’ from being placed upon them” (124). Aside from keeping his racial identity a secret to protect his children from having to endure material racism, Johnson’s narrator closes the novel with profoundly ambivalent thoughts on his own racial identity. He writes, “Sometimes it seems to me I have never really been a Negro, that I have only been a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother’s people” (124). This inexplicable longing for his “mother’s people” echoes Du Bois’s recollection of his grandmother singing the unknown lyrics of an African song to him as a child.

The narrator describes attending a “great meeting in the interest of Hampton Institute at Carnegie Hall,” which included speakers such as Booker T. Washington and Mark Twain, and where “The Hampton students sang old songs and awoke memories that left me sad” (125). A later iteration of the kinds of fundraisers that Du Bois had observed putting the old songs to work for material gain, these songs arouse in the narrator a racial melancholy and also a sense of regret, for “They are men who are making history and a

race. I, too, might have taken part in a work so glorious” (125). His phrasing is revealing here. History is something that is made, as is race. Rather than fixing it as biological essence, it is the “work” of making race that gives it significance and reality. The narrator laments that when he “sometimes open[s] a little box in which I keep my fast yellowing manuscripts,” he fears that he may “have sold his birthright for a mess of pottage” (125).<sup>xiv</sup>

This meta- reference to his “manuscripts” was of a piece with the novel’s original publication history. Originally written anonymously and marketed as a true story, Johnson’s novel opens with a preface, signed simply “The Publishers.” As Jacqueline Goldsby has pointed out, Johnson wrote the Preface himself (xxi). By prefacing his anonymous narrator’s tale in this way, Johnson is clearly playing with the tradition in slave narratives of having a notable white person write a preface to the text to effectively vouch for the author’s veracity (see, for example, William Lloyd Garrison’s preface to Frederick Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative*).<sup>xv</sup> Throughout his preface, Johnson speaks to the power of the narrative contained therein by using the language of the visual. To use the visual in this way would have special significance at the time when Johnson was writing, as photography and film were emerging as technologies that were able to ostensibly give viewers an objective perspective on the people and issues of the day.

Of course, viewing ethnographic photographic projects such as Edward Curtis’s *North American Indian* and Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, it is easy to see how these claims to objectivity rely on a significant amount of myth-making and framing on the part of the ethnologist. In other cases, such as that of the anti-lynching campaign spearheaded by Ida B. Wells in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century leading to

the formation of the NAACP in 1909, photographs documenting horrific scenes of racial violence were used to mobilize anti-racist activism. Johnson, in his preface, seems to play on his reader's expectations for this sort of visually-oriented, documentary realist and purportedly objective approach when he opens, "This vivid and startlingly new *picture* of conditions brought about by the race question in the United States makes no special plea for the Negro, but *shows* in a dispassionate, though sympathetic, manner conditions as they usually exist between the whites and blacks to-day" (1, italics mine). He closes by claiming that "In this book the reader is given a glimpse behind the scenes of this race-drama which is being here enacted,--he is taken upon an elevation where he can catch a birds-eye view of the conflict which is being waged" (1).

However, even in this brief preface, Johnson simultaneously undermines the claims to visually situated objectivity made by his narrator. The realm of the visual has typically been, as Nicole Fleetwood puts it "punitive" (13), with the white gaze fixing and exerting control over the black body. But what Johnson's "Publishers" claim that the text offers its readers is a "a view of the inner life of the Negro in America" (1); that is, not a view of the black body in America, but a view inside the black mind. Because as the preface notes, while "It is very likely that the Negroes of the United States have a fairly correct idea of what the white people in the country think of them . . . they are themselves more or less a sphinx to the whites" (1). Here, Johnson conjures the image of the sphinx, part animal and part human, drawn from ancient Egyptian (African) mythology to describe the distorted image of the African American as human circulating in early twentieth century American culture. As the preface notes, "Special pleas have already been made for and against the Negro in hundreds of books, but in these books

either his virtues or his vices have been exaggerated” (1). What Johnson, in disguise as “The Publishers,” is getting at here is the deceptive objectivity offered by relying on the realm of the visual, the bodily, the inscribed, to make claims to knowledge. The author observes that “It is curiously interesting and even vitally important to know what are the thoughts of ten millions of them [African Americans] concerning the people among whom they live,” and a piece of this knowledge is what the anonymous narrator’s story purports to provide (1).

So while the novel’s ending is of course tragic, we might consider what it meant for Johnson to have presented this tragedy initially as “true,” when it was in fact his artistic creation. And after all, it is not as though Johnson doesn’t provide his readers with reason to question his reliability. Looking back to the novel’s beginning we see Johnson’s narrator causing the reader to question his “true story” when, explaining his desire to reveal “the great secret of my life,” he muses that “back of it all, I think I find a sort of savage and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society” (3). Here we have Johnson’s narrator presenting himself as trickster figure, and a figure that employs stereotypes of black masculinity (“savage and diabolical”) to, in Ellisonian fashion, “change the joke and slip the yoke,” turning his personal racial tragedy into a dark joke on American society through its recording on the written page. And this practical joke is also Johnson’s own meta- practical joke on his readership, playing on the white desire to “know” the black experience through the “true” written testimony of black people, and presenting them instead with an unresolved phono/graphic conception of black music as a model for how a modern blackness might be performed in an increasingly technologized, mass-mediated world.

## Conclusion:

Some have argued that the real tragedy of the ending of Johnson's novel is, essentially, the tragedy of the commodification and mediatization of black culture and black music.<sup>xvi</sup> In his preface to *The Second Book of Negro Spirituals*, Johnson notes the inevitability of this trend, writing that "the urge and necessity upon the Negro to make his own music, his own songs, are being destroyed not only by the changing psychology but by such modern mechanisms as the phonograph and the radio," and ultimately concluding that because of this, "The production of genuine Aframerican folk-art must, sooner or later, cease" (21). And yet, while it is easy to read lamentation into Johnson's reading of the (phono/graphic) writing on the wall, I find that Johnson, as the (initially) invisible author of a text which (again, initially) was published with intentional ambiguity regarding the status as real-life memoir or fictional novel, shows more savvy than many critics give him credit for regarding the possibilities of hijacking representations of blackness in modern media.

And Du Bois too, was more savvy, and more engaged with these changes in the ways that black music was being performed and transmitted (even if he was not particularly excited about these changes) than he is often credited for. Criticisms of Du Bois as out of touch, overly conservative, and conciliatory to the white establishment have come from many of his contemporaries and successors, including Johnson. Though his relationship with Du Bois and his regard for *Souls* warmed over time, at one point Johnson wrote in a notebook that "Du Bois [ought to have been] a house servant" (Goldbsy xviii). And yet, the debt that *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* owes to

*Souls* is obvious and has been much remarked upon. Robert Stepto writes, “That Johnson is struggling with the example of *The Souls* while composing *The Autobiography* is . . . manifest almost to the point of embarrassment” (344). Part of Johnson’s debt to Du Bois stems from not just the idea of double consciousness,<sup>xvii</sup> but also from the elaboration, through his use of music, of a black identity that is neither entirely phonic nor graphic, which is no more a nostalgically primitivized improvisatory performance than it is a set of notes recorded on a page. We see this, as I have shown, in the complexity of his use of the Sorrow Songs, and also in his nuanced portrayal of the Jubilee Singers, real black people who negotiated the bringing of those songs of black suffering to white audiences, walking the tightrope of authenticity and marketability.

This is a similar balance to what Johnson was trying to strike with *The Autobiography*. As Goldsby notes, he wrote the book in part to “exploit--and, so, explore--the tensions intrinsic to the making of books as art and commodity objects” (xliv). In this context, then, Johnson’s earlier comments likening the plight of African Americans to “a great comedian who gives up the lighter roles to play tragedy,” and the resultant “opportunity of the future Negro novelist and poet to give the country something new and unknown in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggling, and the passions of those of their race who are striving to break the narrow limits of traditions” take on new resonances (100). When we look at the way that the novel came to be published in this macroscopic, meta- fashion, we can see that by publishing the tragic novel in the form of an anonymously-authored “memoir” which plays self-consciously on the conventions of the slave narrative, and through the phono/graphic possibilities he locates in ragtime music for navigating the ambiguities of racial identity in the modern mediascape,



Johnson is recognizing the realities of mediated blackness in the twentieth century and attempting to locate strategies for seizing control of the “performance” or “stunt” that is racial identity. Perhaps neither Johnson nor his narrator fully come to terms with the ramifications of the phono/graphic mode of blackness that he follows Du Bois in provisionally elaborating, but this mode of reflexively engaging with circulating and mediated blackness is one that Ralph Ellison picks up on when he inserts his invisible narrator into the stereophonic and stereoscopic world of the mid-twentieth century.

### Notes

<sup>i</sup> It is worth noting, however, that perhaps recognizing the paternalistic implications of the term, Du Bois had for the most part stopped using the term “talented tenth” by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century

<sup>ii</sup> It is also important to note the masculinist cast of this particular brand of uplift. As Gaines observes: “Oppression kept African Americans from fulfilling the majority society’s normative gender conventions, and racist discourses portrayed society’s denial of the authoritative moral status of the patriarchal family as a racial stigma, a lack of morality, and thus, a badge of inferiority. For educated blacks, the family, and patriarchal gender relations, became crucial signifiers of respectability [...] Claiming respectability often meant denouncing nonconformity to patriarchal gender conventions and bourgeois morality” (5). Both Du Bois and Johnson can and have been read as often reinforcing this version of “respectability.”

<sup>iii</sup> By linking the writing of Du Bois and Johnson to the phonograph, I am building upon the work of a number of scholars. Katherine Biers argues that Johnson’s *Autobiography* is informed by a “material logic of the phonograph, closely tied to the so-called ragtime craze of the pre-World War I era” (99). She summarizes, “In the Western philosophical tradition, the domain of the *phone* is that of pure transparency, of a meaning borne on the breath. That of the *graph* is the material substitution for the spoken or sung word. Black cultural practices are phonographic because, in reproducing themselves without writing, they emphasize the materiality of sound and therefore resist reduction to either side of the binary” (99). Discussing Du Bois’s aesthetic, Weheliye reads *Souls* “as an attempt to transmit sonic information in the same manner as phonograph records, despite its inability to do so” (536-537). Regarding Johnson, Biers argues that the *Autobiography*’s “phonographic logic [...] gives the simultaneous impression that the ex-colored man is faithfully recording events *and* that he is missing something. The *Autobiography*’s tropes of inscription suggest that the narrator is ‘unreliable’ *because* the ‘real’ of his experiences is being recorded and captured” (115).

<sup>iv</sup> Representative of this line of thinking, Alexander Weheliye has argued that for Du Bois (and black subjects generally in the twentieth century), “sound emerges as a space where black subjectivity is not fixed by the look of white subjects, but is instead articulated dynamically by black subjects themselves” (536). Observing the influence that *Souls* had

on Johnson's *Autobiography*, Michael North writes, "One of the many ways Johnson follows Du Bois [...] is in this insistent association of community with sound and of alienation with sight" (178). He goes on to elaborate that for both Du Bois and Johnson, the answer to black commonality in the 20th century "lies in a culture exemplified by music, which creates and sustains ties of commonality that subsist within geographical, regional, and perhaps even national difference" (183). This elusive connection to an authentic black identity based in the African past is also what Paul Gilroy gets at in his famous reading of Du Bois's use of African American Sorrow Songs in *Souls* as "a cipher for the ineffable, sublime, pre-discursive and anti-discursive elements in black expressive culture" (120).

<sup>v</sup> I use "sublation" in the Hegelian sense rather than "synthesis" because synthesis to me implies an overly unproblematic fusion of the thesis and antithesis, whereas sublation, translated from the German "aufhebung," contains within it the seemingly contradictory meanings of preservation, alteration, and elevation. As Hegel wrote in his 1816 *Science of Logic* that the dialectical moment resulting in sublation produces, "a fresh concept but higher and richer than its predecessor; for it is richer by the negation or opposite of the latter, therefore contains it, but also something more, and is the unity of itself and its opposite" (647). Thus, under this formulation, as a dialectic is sublated, elements of the thesis and antithesis are preserved even while they are altered, and sublation is, in a sense, the inhabiting of contradiction. Additionally, as for the idea of elevation contained in sublation, Hegel writes that as a dialectic is sublated, it "passes into a higher form" (647). I find this connotation of elevation contained in the meaning of sublation to be especially relevant to Du Bois's aesthetic, evidenced in his stated aim in *Souls* to "dwell above the Veil" (74).

<sup>vi</sup> Of course, use of the term "signifying" invokes Henry Louis Gates' landmark 1988 text *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, wherein Gates uses the African folk practice of signifying, a referential form of wordplay, to model intertextual continuities in the African American literary tradition. My notion of the meta-black aesthetic is of course indebted to Gates' conception, however I would differentiate meta-blackness from signifying in the way that the authors and artists I discuss are not signifying so much on the "tradition" as they are on the way representations of blackness are mediated and circulated. In this case, Du Bois and Johnson signify not only on the black musical tradition, but in a kind of meta-fashion upon the representations and transcriptions of this tradition by white folklorists.

<sup>vii</sup> Granted, ample evidence in Du Bois's writing supports such readings. In his closing chapter on the Sorrow Songs, Du Bois writes that, "Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and mine" (155). Du Bois takes this claim of an inborn connection to the Sorrow Songs back even further when he cites an African song sung by his "grandfather's grandmother," and, after printing the bars of its music along with the lyrics which he does not understand, writes, "it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music" (157). Thus, for Du Bois, this music provides a link to a communal black identity, and to the African past by way of the recent history of slavery.

Importantly, this connection resides not in the literal meaning of its words, but rather, in the music itself.

<sup>viii</sup> Outlining these essentializing tendencies among nineteenth-century folklorists, Ronald Radano writes that “In diaries, journals, and public recollections, writers depicted the experience of the slave sound world as a particularly audible sensation whose special properties tested the outer limits of the Western imagination.” (508). Radano goes on to claim that the psychic function of the transcriptions for white Americans was to provide “a documentary record of another’s past; black singing assumed the form of a discernible *difference* [...] A racialized, sound-filled difference became the key reference point for white writers, whose essays and transcriptions offered ever newer ways of gesturing to a realm out of bounds” (508). In the context of the Industrial Revolution, then, “black musical difference became the key to the recovery of a forgotten past,” assuaging white anxieties around the emergence of technological modernity (Radano 509).

<sup>ix</sup> Zamir makes a similar argument when he finds that “Du Bois’s account of the spirituals lays stress not on the recuperation of an essentialized wholeness from the past, but instead on an art that is responsive to historical change” (184).

<sup>x</sup> Many scholars, of course, have analyzed the significance of Du Bois’s use of the Sorrow Songs. However, there remains room for added nuance in this analysis, particularly in its assessment of the dynamic relationship between sounded and written expression. Examining Du Bois’s use of the bars of music as headers to his chapters in *Souls*, Eric Sundquist notes the coded nature of the music’s inclusion without lyrics, writing that “the music functions antiphonally with respect to Du Bois’s written text, such that one must ‘hear’ sounds that are not on the page. (324). I agree with the general thrust of this argument that Du Bois included the Sorrow Songs without lyrics (or titles, which are only explicated in the final chapter) consciously in order to show the seeming impermeability of the veil. However, I would disagree that the music functions antiphonally with Du Bois’s writing.

<sup>xi</sup> As with Du Bois, there is textual support for this reading. Johnson articulates a similarly deeply rooted linkage between music and heritage when he describes his mother playing the piano for him as a child, to which he attributes his becoming a musician: “Sometimes [...] she would play simple accompaniments to some old southern songs which she sang. In these songs she was freer, because she played them by ear” (7). Here, as in Du Bois, a “freedom” is attached to the songs’ not being written on the page, to their being played “by ear,” rather than read visually. And Johnson makes the association between the playing of these songs and a black identity explicit when he writes that “I remember that I had a particular fondness for the black keys” (8).

<sup>xii</sup> To take one prominent example, this separatist notion of the black folk informs LeRoi Jones’ famed *Blues People*. Though Jones does not portray black folk culture as entirely fixed in an authentic past, his famed notion of the “changing same” shows a great degree of attachment to the “sameness” of an authentic black folkloric past rooted in an Africanist sensibility which Jones, in Manichean fashion, sees as representing a “diametrically opposed [interpretation] of life” to the Euro-American perspective.

<sup>xiii</sup> In Joel Dinerstein’s *Swinging the Machine*, for example, the author makes what is in many respects a compelling argument that black musicians in the early twentieth century

elaborated what he calls a “humanized machine aesthetics” that managed to blend the sped-up realities of modern American life with earlier Afro-diasporic musical traditions (12). Christopher Small, in his study of African American music, makes a similar argument when he cites the “black genius for humanizing the mechanical” and uses as an example the way that rap musicians effectively “rehumanized” mechanized disco music (402, 220). The emphasis of both authors on the centrality of performativity to the black musical aesthetic (Small’s use of the term “musicking” to describe the process of participating in musical performance, for example) seems pertinent, so long as we remain cautious not to simplistically equate black music (and black people) with heightened physicality. To this end, Simon Frith’s notion of music-making (and listening) as being characterized not so much by a mind/body split as by the integration of “mind-in-the-body” is useful.

<sup>xiv</sup> Closing the novel with this phrase, a reference to the story of Esau in the Bible, is curious. The phrase has been picked up by literary authors such as Swift, Byron, and Henry David Thoreau, and is also used by Marx in *Capital*. Perhaps conscious of the currency of the phrase, Johnson uses it to express once again the dichotomy between the spiritual (his birthright) and the material (the mess of pottage). For Johnson’s narrator then, these written manuscripts (interestingly described as “yellowing,” a color often used to designate light-skinned people of mixed racial ancestry) serve as a symbol of another world, a “dream” of an existence beyond the material constraints of race and discrimination.

<sup>xv</sup> Indeed, in her introduction to the 2015 *Norton Critical Edition* of the text, Jacqueline Goldsby points out that Johnson’s anonymous framing of the novel, and his presenting the work of fiction as autobiography were very much intentional, demonstrating through his correspondence that Johnson “orchestrate[d] [a] campaign to publicize the novel as an authentic autobiography rather than the novel it was” (xxiii). As for the preface specifically, Goldsby points out that “To call this story an ‘autobiography’ was a heretical act on Johnson’s part, given that genre’s legacy in African American literature” (xvi). That is to say, Johnson was certainly signifying, in “meta-“ fashion, on the genre of African American autobiography and slave narrative, and the tradition of “white sponsors legitimating black authors” (Goldsby xxi).

<sup>xvi</sup> Mark Goble reads the ending as “materializ[ing] the racial death of the ex-colored man in the technology of writing” (181). Goble finds that Johnson juxtaposes the whiteness of writing with the “sensuous, spontaneous immediacy of music” represented in the black musical aesthetic and reads the novel’s ending as the narrator’s attempt to martyr himself to prevent black music from being mediated in written form: “Johnson’s narrator wants us to believe that he has killed his ‘colored’ self to preserve a far more valuable black aesthetic from being mediated right out of existence” (181, 180). North expresses a similar argument regarding the mediation of black music, but acknowledges that the tragedy for the narrator perhaps lies in the reality that the mediation he wishes to prevent has already occurred: “his regret at having made the wrong choice masks the fact that there was never a real choice to make: the music that represents full racial participation to him has already been made into a spectacle, one that makes racial identity itself into a performance, even a stunt” (184). North cites Johnson’s “insistent association of

community with sound and of alienation with sight” in the novel, and his “suspicion of spectacle, of an impotence that comes from being forced to see and to be seen, that seems to make explicit a reaction to modern media” (178).

<sup>xvii</sup> Stepto notes how Johnson’s descriptions of the dawning of racial consciousness on his young narrator so closely echo the corollary scene in *Souls* that “one wonders why a footnote is not appended” (356).

## CHAPTER 2

### "BLACK IS . . . BLACK AIN'T": RALPH ELLISON'S META-BLACK AESTHETIC AND THE "END" OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

In the previous chapter, I observe how the employments of the trope of music, specifically popularized forms of black music, in the writings of James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois sublate tensions between the written and the oral, the phonic and the graphic, and constitute nascent iterations of the meta-black aesthetic that I outline in this dissertation. This chapter moves ahead in time to 1952 and the publication of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. There are certainly other texts in between Johnson's *Autobiography* and *Invisible Man* that I could have discussed as early examples of meta-black aesthetic techniques, among them the incorporation of blues and jazz musics by Harlem Renaissance writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and others. However, I skip ahead here for two crucial reasons, aside from concerns of space. First, the historical moment when *Invisible Man* was written and published represents a critical turn towards the contemporary meta-black aesthetic that I observe in later artists and authors. Of course, mediated popular cultural expressions of blackness existed in the early 20th century, on record and on film, but around the middle of the 20th century, with the proliferation of the home phonograph and also the television, African American popular culture truly became mass culture (in America and internationally). In his novel, Ellison is particularly attuned to this cultural turn and its implications for black identity, and thus *Invisible Man* constitutes a central text to the aesthetic I observe.

The second reason for my move ahead in literary-historical time here is Ellison's choice of Louis Armstrong as an icon through which to elaborate some of his ideas about

the changing nature of black American identity in the mid 20th century. Armstrong was an artist who himself bridges the gap between Johnson and Du Bois's era and Ellison's, and I argue that the particular changes that Armstrong's career underwent during the years between these eras are in fact exactly why Ellison chooses him to serve as a central figure in the novel.<sup>1</sup> Armstrong's transformation in the mid-20th century from a jazz innovator to an iconic, audio-visual, mass cultural performer informed Ellison's choice to use him in the novel. Additionally, Ellison's choice to represent a technologically reproduced and mediated version of Armstrong and his articulation of a mode of black identity that I find to be inspired by the developing technology of stereophonic recording (a technology of which Ellison was an enthusiastic early adopter) points us not merely to the past, but to the future of black identity, illuminating, as I will demonstrate, the aesthetics of contemporary literary and popular cultural artists. In what follows, then, I will outline Ellison's version of a meta-black aesthetic to account for his use of fragments of mass-mediated, popular cultural iconography of blackness as the very material with which to build an eclectic subjectivity. Ellison "samples" popular cultural specters of blackness (Armstrong in particular) so as to open up space for a black subjectivity that is neither "post-" black nor tethered to prescriptive notions of what "black is."

Ellison's version of a meta-blackness also has much to offer as we move forward to contemporary struggles in African American studies to bridge the divide in "post-blackness" debates between desire for eclectic individuality and the need for communal solidarity, and also as we consider Kenneth Warren's important but controversial demarcation of the "end" of African American literature with the end of de jure Jim Crow. One of the leading contemporary critics on Ellison, Warren notes the diverse ways

that *Invisible Man* and its author have been interpreted from within and without the African American community, with Ellison being alternately characterized as race traitor, “race man,” and “transracial messiah” (“So Black and Blue” 16). Warren reads *Invisible Man* as perhaps the quintessential example of a strain of African American literature seeking to assert black humanity to a segregated society in which that humanity was very materially in question. He finds the novel to be a powerful reminder of this humanity, but he wonders “how much longer . . . such reminders [will] be necessary” (“What Was African American Literature?” 107). Recent high-profile instances of institutional and interpersonal racism, “stop-and-frisk” law enforcement offensives, and the prison-industrial complex might make it easy to dismiss Warren’s question as overly optimistic at best. However, we need to take seriously his claim that perhaps Ellison’s novel in particular, and African American literature generally, don’t quite matter in the same way they once did.<sup>ii</sup>

Warren’s fundamental claim in *What Was African American Literature?* -- that “African American literature was a post-emancipation phenomenon that gained its coherence as an undertaking in the social world defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation”-- may seem to be primarily a question of genre and periodization (1). Certainly, some of the criticism of Warren’s argument has been along these lines. Gene Andrew Jarrett, for example, has claimed that “[s]uch a narrow periodization overstates the role that constitutional or juridical events have played in race relations, while restricting the political awareness and activities of African American writers to discourses of de jure segregation” (Jarrett 389). Erica Edwards has additionally claimed that “[i]t was precisely with the post-Jim Crow creation of black literature classrooms,



that African American writers and critics re-turned to and reinvented ‘African American literature,’ again and against history.” These sorts of debates have always been a piece of academic discussions around canon formation and the definitions of national and ethnic literatures, of course, but the volume and the vehemence of the response to Warren’s argument suggests that there is something more at stake than determining where Toni Morrison’s novels should be stocked in the bookstore.

Warren himself freely admits that racism still exists and clarifies that while he does claim American society to be “post–Jim Crow” -- “as for postrace, I make no such claims” (Gates and Warren, “Live Chat”). Regardless, it is easy to see why, when he describes Jim Crow–era African American literature as “prospective” and post–Jim Crow literature written by African Americans as largely “retrospective,” many readers take it as a challenge to the idea that cultural and, by extension, political solidarity based on race remain practical bases for pursuing social justice in the contemporary moment.<sup>iii</sup> This is what inserts Warren, whether he would like it or not, into conversations around “post-blackness”<sup>8</sup> and the utility of blackness as identity in the post–Civil Rights moment being carried on by such pundits such as Touré, such political theorists such as Tommie Shelby, such so-called Afro-pessimist critics as Saidiya Hartman, and those, like Fred Moten, who frame blackness in terms of performativity.<sup>iv</sup> These questions, of the continuing relevance and utility of blackness in the contemporary moment, are the core questions that this notion of meta-blackness, conceiving of circulating “blackness” as something that must be accounted for (and that can also be used by black subjects), attempts to address.

However he may try to confine himself to debates over the semantics of literary

canon formation, Warren does dip his toes into these larger conversations when he writes, responding to those who privilege a pursuit of “racial democracy” over “social democracy”:

[T]o believe that a politics centered on removing the barriers of discrimination that may still hinder the advancement of, say, blacks in Wall Street financial firms, is the same as a politics fundamentally interested in a more egalitarian redistribution of wealth is a mistake that at least some of us can no longer afford. (“Response” 590)

The argument that class-based solidarity should be granted primacy over race-based solidarity is not new. However, as innumerable recent events centering around the interactions of African Americans and law enforcement and the #BlackLivesMatter social movement that has sprung up around these events make plain, to privilege class at the expense of race risks ignoring the material and psychological realities of embodied black experience in the United States.

This experience, while it certainly intersects in important ways with class, carries its own weight, oftentimes the very weight of life and death.<sup>v</sup> As Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it in *Between the World and Me*, addressing his teenaged son in an open-letter form borrowed from James Baldwin, “You have seen all the wonderful life up above the tree-line, yet you understand that there is no real difference between you and Trayvon Martin, and thus Trayvon Martin must terrify you in a way that he could never terrify me. You have seen so much more of all that is lost when they destroy your body” (24-25). Coates’s

focus on the sensate and psychological experience of blackness in America provides an important counterpoint to analyses like Warren's that, as Hua Hsu aptly puts it in a review of *What Was African American Literature?*, "[underestimate] the broader, more nebulous blast radius of slavery--the effects that are not as legible or confirmed by statute, the ills that are perpetuated through ideology rather than code" (135). These effects are what Coates attempts to attune his son and his reader to when he writes that "[y]ou must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body" (10). He goes on to instruct his son that "this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it" (11-12). I argue that we find in Ellison's novel the articulation of such a meta-black mode of living within the black body and within a country and world wherein sounds and images of the black body permeate the collective consciousness. It is here, in his elaboration of this meta-blackness, that Ellison's *Invisible Man* takes on resonances for which Warren's reading of the novel as a swan song for African American literature cannot account.

Given the pivotal position that Ellison and *Invisible Man* occupy in an analysis as controversial and groundbreaking as Warren's, the novel occupies a similarly central place in my response to claims that the novel (and the Civil Rights Act) mark any sort of "end" to African American literature or to the utility of blackness as identity. Because while of course *Invisible Man* is in many respects a product of its time, and served as a necessary reminder of black humanity, the novel additionally articulates a forward-looking model of black subjectivity in the face of mass-mediated subjection that has often been overlooked. This mode of selfhood becomes increasingly necessary in the late

twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and it profoundly influences the way that blackness as identity is treated in contemporary literature by authors such as Paul Beatty, Percival Everett, Danzy Senna, and ZZ Packer (to name a few) who some term “post-black.”<sup>vi</sup> Ellison’s choice of Louis Armstrong as a key figure in the development of his narrator’s subjectivity, and the narrator’s desire to “hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing ‘What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue’ --all at the same time,” represent the novel’s quintessential iteration of this meta-blackness; thus, this chapter pivots around an analysis of the implications of the ways that Ellison deploys black music and blackness as it circulates in the novel, culminating in this technologically mediated invocation of Armstrong (8).

### **Slipping into the Breaks: Ellison and the Stereophonic/Stereoscopic Self**

Black music is undoubtedly a recurring trope in the novel and in Ellison’s oeuvre generally. While Ellison spent much of the rest of his life composing his follow-up to *Invisible Man*, he was throughout his career a prolific essayist, and music featured prominently in this writing. From reviews of music and texts on music, such as LeRoi Jones’s *Blues People*, to occasional pieces, such as his “Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday,” to the reflections on the larger societal resonances of music in his oft-cited “Living with Music,” Ellison finds black music to be a critical piece of what makes African American culture and identity exceptional. And it was also key to what he found exceptional about American culture and identity more generally. Ellison famously used his ideal conception of jazz music as a model of ideal democratic society, writing that “true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz

moment . . . springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvasses of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition” (267).

Given the centrality of black music to Ellison’s oeuvre, it is unsurprising that there has been a prominent strain of criticism that has, at its extreme, asserted that “[i]f *Invisible Man* has been at all successful in helping to undermine the authority of white paternalism, it presumably has done so not by marshaling the stylistic resources of novelistic form but rather by appropriating the resources of black musical culture” (“So Black and Blue” 26).<sup>vii</sup> Critics differ as to whether the novel is a “jazz text,” a “literary extension of the blues,” or some combination of the two (Porter 74; Murray 167).<sup>viii</sup> Despite their differences, these critics share a sense that what makes *Invisible Man* special as literature is the inspiration it draws from black vernacular musical culture. Walton Muyumba exemplifies this approach when he reads the novel as “literary improvisation” and Timothy Spaulding similarly argues that Ellison’s “protagonist achieves his sense of identity by improvising on elements of his past through key figures that represent both musical and cultural traditions within their narrative voices” (Muyumba 58; Spaulding 482). In short, whether their focus is on the blues or jazz influences in Ellison’s novel, many of these critics seem to view Ellison’s achievement in the novel as a synthesis of the oral, improvisatory vernacular culture represented by the black musical aesthetic with the written, meticulously composed high modernism of the novelistic form.<sup>ix</sup>

Ellison certainly saw his own task as a writer in a similarly synthetic light, and so my aim here is not to rebuke such analyses of his writing. In a well-known 1958 interview, for instance, Ellison says of his approach: “having inherited the language of Shakespeare and Melville, Mark Twain and Lincoln and no other, I try to do my part in keeping the American language alive and rich by using in my work the music and idiom of American Negro speech” (“Shadow and Act” 266). However, to examine music in *Invisible Man* through the prism of a simple binary, with the “authentic” folk on one pole and high modernist style on the other, is to ignore the ways that technology and the world of mass-mediated culture are incorporated into Ellison’s descriptions of black music in his novel.

Critical analysis of Ellison’s writing on the trope of technology in *Invisible Man* remains relatively thin, though there are some notable exceptions.<sup>x</sup> Even thinner is analysis that examines the connections between the ways he writes music and technology into the novel. Given the fact that the phonographic listening experience comes at a pivotal point in shaping the narrator’s psychic world, the “stereo-” as metaphor might add some additional nuance to a consideration of Ellison’s novelistic version of black identity.<sup>xi</sup> In her study of the influence of African American music on pan-Africanist alliances, Tsitsi Jaji analyzes the etymology of “stereo-” as prefix, noting its original root in the Greek word for “solid.” She observes that while, in its contemporary usage, the prefix “stereo-” has come to “[flag] fundamentally illusionary devices,” it is helpful to retain a consideration of the solidity implied by the term’s origins (12). Jaji writes that in looking for the connections between terms like “stereophonic, stereotypic, [and] stereoscopic . . . , stereo might be thought of as an effect, that which creates the

impression of being surrounded by the contours of a voluminous, extensive three-dimensional body” (11). It is easy to hear an echo of this notion of the stereo as solid when Ellison’s narrator declares, “I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids--and I might even be said to possess a mind” (3). And yet his subsequent lament that “[i]t is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass” expresses the simultaneous simulation that accompanies the stereo (3).

Stereo sound technology, which, in its most basic form relies on repetition with a slight difference (a temporal difference in the audio signals delivered to each ear) to achieve the illusion of three-dimensional performance, was pioneered throughout the 1920s and 1930s, emerging in commercial applications by the early 1950s. Stereophonic radio broadcasts appeared experimentally at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair and were made a “special feature of the 1952 Audio Fair” in New York City (Comstock 106). Ellison, of course, was no stranger to stereo technology. A self-professed “compulsive experimenter” with home audio equipment, Ellison wrote several essays during the 1950s geared toward audiophiles (“Collected Essays” 234). For instance, as stereophonic records for home phonographs began to make their first commercial appearance in 1958, Ellison wrote a technically nuanced account of the developments for *The Saturday Review* entitled “The Swing to Stereo.” In this article, Ellison enthusiastically proclaimed that the announcement of the practical development of stereo technology for home phonographs “had something of the effect attending the news that the U.S. was about to launch its first Earth satellite. The enthusiasm quite outweighed the difficulty” (39).

Given Ellison's own knowledge of and enthusiasm for this technology, we can be sure that he was well aware of its developments in the years he spent composing *Invisible Man*, and thus we might read his "thinker-tinker" narrator's professed ideal listening situation as a sort of makeshift super-stereo system (7). And when we consider that stereophonic sound technology relies on virtually undetectable differences in the time that each audio signal reaches the ear, we may also hear new resonances in Ellison's oft-quoted passage wherein he describes the way that "Invisibility . . . gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around" (8). What I suggest, then, is that here Ellison is exploiting the technology of stereo sound as a metaphor for the unique mode of subjectivity that his narrator is in the process of discovering in his invisibility.

Just as stereophonic sound comprises multiple audio signals with minute temporal differences, so stereoscopic vision is composed of multiple visual scenes with slight differences in perspective. Similarly, stereotypes, in their original printing context, as Jaji points out, produce "a series of increasingly distorted copies of an original solid object" (12). Our contemporary usage of the word "stereotype" derives from this meaning, but despite the negative connotations the word has taken on in this contemporary context, Ellison identifies a similar possibility for black subjects of slipping into the breaks created by stereotypical notions of blackness and of using and ultimately subverting these stereotypes from this vantage point. Positioned in the middle of the twentieth century, Ellison's narrator also offers insight into the way these stereotypes of blackness were



increasingly mediated and multiplied via the circuits of audio/visual technologies. Perhaps no figure in the twentieth century more fully embodies the difficulties and possibilities of navigating this stereophonic, stereoscopic, stereotyped terrain of blackness than Louis Armstrong, and I claim it is for this very reason that Ellison invokes him (in stereo) as a model for the meta-black mode of identity being discovered by his narrator.

### **“The Latest Style”: Louis Armstrong, Technology, and the Performance of Twentieth Century Blackness**

As musician, performer, and persona, Armstrong achieved a truly international reach by way of the emergent technologies of radio, home phonograph, and later, television, becoming easily one of the (if not *the*) most popular and recognizable African American musical entertainers of the century.<sup>xii</sup> In the years leading up to the publication of *Invisible Man*, Armstrong was achieving what biographer Terry Teachout terms a “renewal” of his career (267). As the big band format that had dominated 1920s and 1930s jazz was declining in popularity and becoming less financially sustainable for artists, Armstrong began performing in 1947 with a leaner six-piece band called Louis Armstrong and His All Stars.<sup>xiii</sup> As bop became ascendant in the jazz world, Armstrong remained relevant by playing a brand of jazz that stayed true to traditional roots while putting an increased focus on himself as jazz singer and as individual, iconic performer. Ellison’s choice of Armstrong to occupy such a prominent place in the novel takes on added significance in this context. Steven Tracy notes that Ellison originally intended Buddy Bolden to fill the role played in *Invisible Man* by Armstrong (89). While we can

only speculate as to why Ellison changed his mind, it is notable that while Bolden was an innovator of early jazz music, no known recordings of his music exist. Instead, Ellison chose to invoke an artist who, particularly at the time of the novel's publication, had emerged as one of the most iconic and most recorded jazz artists ever.<sup>xiv</sup>

Further, the revitalization of Armstrong's career at this time owed a great deal to technologies such as the home phonograph, sound in films, and television.<sup>xv</sup> Between 1930 and 1950, Armstrong appeared in fourteen films, usually playing himself or a fictionalized version of himself, and these roles became increasingly prominent through the 1940s. Armstrong additionally eagerly embraced the opportunities presented by the medium of television. As Teachout observes, "Armstrong turned up at one time or another on virtually every variety show that aired on network TV in his lifetime, and it was these appearances that did more than anything else to establish him as an indelible presence in postwar American popular culture" (283). However, the increased visibility of Armstrong in this era also did much to exaggerate his divisiveness as a public figure. As civil rights tensions escalated in the late 1940s and early 1950s, many were put off by Armstrong's film and television persona, which was easy to read as "an all-grinning, all-mugging, ever-cheerful minstrellike figure who with unabashed glee performs corny, knuckleheaded routines" (Bogle 148).<sup>xvi</sup> In short, for many, the Armstrong who appeared on film and television was more a reminder of a shameful past than a beacon of a hopeful future.<sup>xvii</sup>

For Ellison, who was busy composing his novel as Armstrong grew increasingly popular and divisive during this period, the musician (specifically, his recorded effigy, duplicated five times over) represented the ideal symbolic beacon of both the hope and

challenges of this future, as well as a representative example of a viable strategy for articulating black subjectivity in a mass-mediated world. Precisely by including Armstrong in the novel in his technologically mediated form (in the protagonist's ideal listening situation, a hypermediated form), Ellison suggests that Armstrong's audience never gets access to the "real" Louis Armstrong.<sup>xviii</sup> But Ellison also proposes that there is potential to use these mediated simulacra of subjectivity in the articulation of black identity. This use value that Ellison vests in Armstrong resides in the way he manipulates stereotypical iconographies of blackness to engage with an audience and perhaps, at least for listeners like Ellison's invisible man, subvert these stereotypes. While the resistance or subversiveness represented by Armstrong can certainly be overstated, he did consciously work to create the sort of engaged audience represented by Ellison's narrator. Daniel Stein, for example, reads in Armstrong's aesthetic "an interactive ethos to expressive media in which audiences were not directly present: sound recording, on which he frequently addressed his listeners directly as ladies and gentlemen . . . , and autobiographical narratives, which are filled with rhetorical questions, apostrophes to the reader, and deictic comments" (106).

We see this "interactive ethos" in one of Armstrong's first filmic appearances, a 1932 Paramount short called *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue*. While Armstrong does not play the Fats Waller song "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue" in the film, *Rhapsody* is relevant to Ellison's use of Armstrong in the novel not only because of the resonance of the title, but also because it displays Armstrong's early consciousness of the power of his music, in its phonographic and filmic forms, to effect an engagement with listeners/viewers.<sup>xix</sup> The film opens with the credits displayed on a spinning record,

immediately emphasizing the mediated nature of the film and of Armstrong's music in the film, and then cuts to a shot of a phonograph playing the Armstrong recording of the Sam Theard song, "(I'll Be Glad When You're Dead) You Rascal You." The music emanating from the phonograph is quickly drowned out by the sound of someone banging and scat-singing along to the record. The shot pans out and we see a black male listener enthusiastically banging drumsticks on a chair, a washtub, and other nearby items. The man's wife interrupts, telling him to "take your ear from out that jazz box, and jazz this mop around this floor." We can already see the film's reliance on familiar stereotypes of the black woman as a nagging, "Mammy" figure and the shiftless, lazy black male.<sup>xx</sup>

The man's wife leaves, and after she catches him again listening to the phonograph, she hits him over the head with a mop. He sinks into a dream state, where he is sitting on a throne as the "King of Jazzmania" and is treated to surrealistic performances by Armstrong, who is draped in leopard skin and surrounded by soap bubbles. As he awakens to find his wife standing behind him and the phonograph needle skipping on the label, he plays on the song's lyrics and declares with a grin, "I'll be glad when I'm dead, you rascal you," and smashes a vase over his head in an attempt to return to Jazzmania. His wife replies, "I'll be more gladder," and as she hits him with a frying pan, the film ends.

Understandably, critics and audiences today are made more than a little uncomfortable by the film's racial and sexual caricatures, and thus even when seeking something redeeming in Armstrong's performance, critics tend to twist themselves into rhetorical knots. Donald Bogle, for example, feels compelled to separate Armstrong's

singing and clowning from his trumpet playing, finding that “[w]hen he puts the lyrics aside to take up his trumpet, he is transformed right before our eyes” (157). Bogle goes on to state that “[i]n these moments, there is something so real, so pure, so sublime that he takes us with him as he transcends the sequence, the very nature and concept of the film itself, and makes us forget the hackneyed setting” (157). It is not to knock Armstrong’s performance to suggest that Bogle’s account of the music verges into the territory of overstatement, especially in regards to Armstrong’s singing.<sup>xxi</sup>

Bogle claims that for white film audiences, Armstrong “represented an ever-enthusiastic, nonthreatening, friendly figure who did not challenge their assumptions on race or racial superiority--except when he played his instrument” (159). However, to separate his playing and visual performance in this way misses the fact that, for Armstrong (and all black performers trying to make a living in a racist society), this ambivalent relationship to racial caricatures could not be avoided, and it cannot be separated from any part of the music. For example, a closer look at the surreal landscape of Jazzmania casts a different light on Armstrong’s performance in the film. While Armstrong’s leopard-print clothing evokes stereotypical images of the pre-modern African, he also wears a V-shaped glittering neckpiece. This detail seems to evoke early imaginings of space travelers, such as Buck Rogers, who was often depicted wearing similar neckpieces in his earliest comic strip appearances in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This hint of futurism, along with the glittering pillars and rays of light emanating from the film’s backdrop, modify simple readings of Armstrong’s role in the film. Further, in his performance of “Shine,” Armstrong takes the opportunity presented by the line “I likes to dress up in the latest style” to point to his outfit, offering a knowing grin to

acknowledge the absurdity of the costume and perhaps even point out his consciousness of the fact that, even in spite of how far African Americans have come, racial stereotypes still very much represent the “latest style.”

It is this ambivalence surrounding the Armstrong persona, and this willingness to play within and against a regime of mass-mediated stereotypes of blackness, that lead Ellison to depict Armstrong as he does in the novel. By doing so, Ellison makes plain that for black American subjects in the mid-twentieth century generally, as American racist ideologies began to be increasingly duplicated and transmitted via the circuits of mass-mediated communication, adopting a meta- approach to blackness became a necessity of material existence. This meta-identity becomes increasingly necessary as the hypervisibility of blackness, which Nicole Fleetwood has defined as a “term to describe processes that produce the overrepresentation of certain images of blacks and the visual currency of these images in public culture” enters an era of Baudrillardian “hyperreality,” wherein “[e]verywhere socialization is measured by the exposure to media messages” (Fleetwood 16; Baudrillard 80). In this context, black subjects seeking, as Coates puts it, to “find some way to live within the all” of the world and their own raced bodies, must simultaneously engage with and work against the simulacra of blackness permeating the cultural imaginary (and its very real institutions and ideologies) (12). Meta-blackness, with its insights into how contemporary black identity deploys and engages with blackness as it circulates in American culture might provide a basis for the sort of elusive communal solidarity that seems so crucial to contemporary social movements for racial justice as they are conducted in both the material and virtual worlds.

Take, for example, three recent examples springing out of the #BlackLivesMatter

movement: the wearing of hoodies in protest of the killing of Trayvon Martin, and the use of the “I Can’t Breathe” and “Hands up, don’t shoot” phrases and gestures (and Twitter hashtags) in the wake of Eric Garner and Michael Brown’s deaths at the hands of police officers. In all of these cases, protestors (from activists to politicians, professional athletes, and celebrities) invoke sounds and images of the black male as criminal and of the black male in the literal crosshairs and grasp of police violence, and take them beyond their contexts in the realms of reality and stereotype. These protestors are able to cleverly reframe these tragic, stultifying depictions of black masculinity in a meta- fashion, elevating them to the level of the iconic. As these meta-black symbolic gestures permeate the popular imaginary through the internet, mass media, and of course, protests carried out on the ground around the world, they have been mobilized as platforms to forge solidarity in material and virtual contexts around issues of racial justice. Ellison, of course, was not known for being radical politically,<sup>xxii</sup> but we can read his sense of the growing necessity and potential usefulness of this meta-black mode of selfhood in the pages of *Invisible Man*. Such a reading of the novel allows us to complement Warren’s retrospective take on it as a plea for the recognition of black humanity under Jim Crow with a prospective reading that acknowledges the novel’s insights into how blackness as identity is lived in the contemporary moment and how a meta-black approach to racial solidarity remains relevant post-Jim Crow.

### **“Somewhere between Rinehart and invisibility”: Meta-Black Identity in *Invisible Man***

Ellison’s prologue to *Invisible Man* suggests a somewhat darker parallel to the plot of *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue*. As the narrator “discover[s] a new analytical way

of listening” to Armstrong’s “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue” “under the spell of . . . reefer,” he, like the man in the film, “enter[s] the music” (8, 9). Instead of entering the fantasy world of Jazzmania, the narrator descends through layers of racial history, finding first an old woman singing a spiritual, then “a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother’s as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body,” and finally, a preacher giving a seemingly contradictory sermon on “the ‘Blackness of Blackness,’” summed up by the declaration “black is . . . an’ black ain’t” (9). While the scene is obviously surreal, and riffs on Ishmael’s musings on the “Whiteness of the Whale” in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, it effectively summarizes the form of black identity articulated by Ellison throughout the novel. As the narrator speaks to the singer about her simultaneous love and hate for her slave master, who was also the father of her children, he responds, “I too have become acquainted with ambivalence. . . . That’s why I’m here” (10). Ellison traces this ambiguity of black identity throughout the novel, and it is through Armstrong’s recorded performance that the invisible man is able to explore this ambivalence. But just as the man in *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue* is returned to consciousness by an upbeat trumpet solo, which ends with Armstrong playing the same note repeatedly, Ellison’s narrator is returned to the real world by a “blaring” trumpet and “hectic” rhythm (12). As he awakens to hear Armstrong asking “What did I do/To be so black/And blue?,” he realizes that “this familiar music had demanded action,” and he embarks, like the iconic Armstrong who inspires him, on his task of making music out of invisibility (12).

Ellison proposes an engaged mode of listening, describing his narrator’s desire not merely to listen passively to Armstrong’s music, but to “*feel* its vibration, not only



with my ear but with my whole body” (8). This urge to listen to Armstrong with his entire body indicates the possibility that Armstrong represents to the narrator in constructing his own subjectivity, a possibility that is powerfully expressed in the last line of the prologue, when, sampling the recorded Armstrong, the narrator directly addresses his audience, posing the question, “But what did I do to be so blue? Bear with me” (14). Ellison then proceeds to tell of his narrator’s various encounters with forms of black identity that, in their links to both black folk culture and negative stereotypes representing a painful history, initially repulse him. However, these same forms of blackness also progressively lead him to a performative, meta-black conception of identity, of which the recorded Armstrong represents the apotheosis.

Following the narrator’s encounter with the primitivist blues stereotype represented by Jim Trueblood, the first model of a performative meta-blackness that the narrator meets in the novel comes in the form of the eccentric Peter Wheatstraw, a black man walking through the city singing the blues with a pushcart filled with blueprints. Wheatstraw is immediately presented as a figure connecting the narrator to a history that, at this point in the novel, he would rather ignore. As the narrator listens to his singing, “some memories slipped around my life at the campus and went far back to things I had long ago shut out of my mind” (173). Where Trueblood (from his name to his cabin “built during slavery times” to his shocking story of incest) represents an exaggerated stereotype of black pathology, Wheatstraw’s version of black identity is forged not from some elusive “true” self but rather from a blues-influenced sampling of black folk and popular culture (47). In identifying himself, Wheatstraw invokes a rapid-fire sequence of markers of African American folk culture:

“I’m a seventh son of a seventh son bawn with a caul over both eyes raised on black cat bones high John the conqueror and greasy greens (176)”. A. Yemisi Jimoh convincingly reads Wheatstraw as a “Blues philosopher,” citing the way that the character’s “status as the seventh son of a seventh son, his special qualities as someone born with a caul, or his birth sac, intact, and his connection to aspects of conjure such as black cat bones and high John the conqueror root give him four connections to knowledge that goes beyond the simple appearance of things” (143, 144). Robert O’Meally similarly reads Wheatstraw’s blues as imparting to Ellison’s narrator the lesson that “southern black folk experience must not be discarded in the North” (“The Craft of Ralph Ellison” 88). Wheatstraw does indeed impart the wisdom of a blues philosophy to the invisible man, and this philosophy is rooted in the African American folk tradition, as these scholars point out; but we should note also that Wheatstraw and his folk wisdom blend the spiritual and the secular. That is, Wheatstraw’s philosophy may have as much to do with the “greasy greens” that end his declaration as with the preceding references to folk religious beliefs.

Beyond being a food traditionally associated with southern African American cooking, “Greasy Greens” is also the title of a traditional blues song. The song is cited in Howard W. Odum’s 1911 collection of traditional African American folk songs, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes,” and first appears on record in a 1950 performance (commercially released in 1961) by Pink Anderson, who spent the early part of the twentieth century as a blues singer and traveling guitarist with touring medicine shows (365).<sup>xxiii</sup> Many versions of the song, like many traditional African American blues songs, contain sexual double entendres (for example, from the Anderson version: “That meat you use must be fat / Cook them greens

so greasy like that / You don't use nothin' but natural lean / You can't cook no good greasy greens"). This reference in the novel, then, and its paratactic juxtaposition with elements of folk religion, reveals Ellison's willingness to playfully sample from all aspects of African American tradition, from the "shit" and "grit" as well as the "mother-wit," as part of his blues-influenced meta-black identity ("Invisible Man" 176).

Further insight into the ambiguous, playfully referential nature of the mode of identity elaborated by Ellison can be gained by unpacking the dual nature of the reference inherent in Wheatstraw's name. Wheatstraw seems to be a reference to both the real-life blues singer Peetie Wheatstraw (whose real name was William Bunch), as well as Peter Wheatstraw, a character drawn from African American folklore, whom Ellison recalled as part of a "frontier brag" that he and his childhood friends would use while playing pool (O'Meally, "How Can the Light Deny the Dark"). Ellison's intentions in using the name in his novel are debatable. According to blues historian Paul Garon in his book-length study of the musician Wheatstraw's life and legacy, the blues guitarist and researcher Leroy Pierson interviewed Ellison and "found that the author had not only known Peetie but also played trumpet with him occasionally in the bars of St. Louis. According to Ellison, the character in the novel was inspired by Peetie's general personality and patterns of speech" (Garon 71-72). And one aspect of Wheatstraw's patterns of speech in his music was the kind of doubly resonant riffing on sexuality that the "Greasy Greens" reference evokes. W.T. Lhamon notes that the "actual Wheatstraw was considerably racier" than Ellison's version and cites some of his lyrics to argue that Ellison intentionally makes use of Wheatstraw's "ambiguous connection to taboo" in order to make a reference that is "as scrubbed or as suggestive as the audience might make it"

(59).

On the record, Ellison was ambiguous as to whether he intended the Wheatstraw character in the novel to refer to Wheatstraw the musician or Wheatstraw the folk legend. In a 1988 interview with Robert O'Meally (published as a piece of O'Meally's review of *Juneteenth* in 1999), Ellison was quoted as saying, "As far as I know 'Peter Wheatstraw' was not, and is not, a living individual, but a character born of Afro-American mythology" ("How Can the Light Deny the Dark"). Regardless, in the context of Ellison's vision of meta-black identity, the very elusiveness and duality of the Wheatstraw reference may be the point. Garon points out that while details of Wheatstraw's life are sketchy at best, and only one known photograph of him exists, Wheatstraw was "one of the more prolifically recorded blues artists" (Garon 24). He was also an emblematic figure of the larger-than-life bluesman persona, billing himself, in spectacular turns of self-fashioning that today's hip-hop artists would surely envy, as "the devil's son-in-law" and the "high sheriff from hell."<sup>xxiv</sup> Here again, then, we have Ellison sampling both from African American folklore and also the iconic, technologically reproduced, and sexually suggestive figure of Wheatstraw the musician as a representative of bold, iconic self-creation working within and against "bad man" and hypersexualized stereotypes of black masculinity. Ellison's dual nod with the Wheatstraw character to a usable, communal past and the performative possibilities of a mediated present and future marks a key touchpoint in the narrator's journey toward a meta-black identity.

The novelistic Wheatstraw's version of blues music also exemplifies this mode of self-creation and again forms a stark contrast with the version of the blues modeled by

Trueblood. Trueblood's version of blues music presents Ellison with an opportunity to parody stereotypical notions of black musicality as inborn and as passive lament in the face of suffering. After his incestuous encounter with his daughter has been discovered, Trueblood recalls, to the narrator and Mr. Norton's fascination and horror, "I *ends up* singin' the blues . . . and while I'm singin' them blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen happen" (66). Wheatstraw's version of a blues identity offers more agency and more performative possibilities. He sings, "She's got feet like a monkey / Legs like a frog" and "I loves my baabay . . . / better than I do myself," and as he walks away, the narrator thinks about the song: "What does it mean, I thought. I'd heard it all my life but suddenly the strangeness of it came through to me. Was it about a woman or about some strange sphinxlike animal? Certainly his woman, no woman, fitted that description. And why describe anyone in such contradictory words?" (173, 177).<sup>xxv</sup> Jimoh has argued that "Ellison uses Wheatstraw to prepare Invisible Man for the possibilities of change and the necessity for variety" (143). Tracy similarly sums up the effect of Wheatstraw's contradictory words, writing that "Ellison's Wheatstraw is a character in possession of but not enslaved to the blueprints (read: blues identity) he carts around--that is, he understands that the plans can be changed" (107). These are both apt analyses, but I would add that a substantive piece of the changes that Ellison's narrator and African Americans in the mid-twentieth century were being forced to grapple with were those wrought by an increase in technological mediation.<sup>xxvi</sup> These changes in the way that subjects raced as black in America had to live with blackness as it circulates in the culture at large are part of what necessitates a meta-black mode of identity, and the beginning of Ellison's narrator's consciousness of

the possibilities and pitfalls of this performative identity truly begin with his climactic encounter with the “spiritual technologist,” Rinehart (495).

By putting on sunglasses and a hat and moving through Harlem, the narrator begins to be mistaken for a man named Rinehart, but he soon realizes that this Rinehart has many different manifestations. He finally stumbles into a church where he is taken to be a preacher named Rinehart. The narrator wonders to himself:

[C]ould he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the reverend? Could he himself be both mind and heart? What is real anyway? But how could I doubt it? He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. . . . The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. (498)

Although varied to be sure, critical readings of what Ellison aimed to express through the character(s) of Rinehart tend to tie him to the jazz aesthetic of improvisation. These critical readings also belie an anxiety, on the part of the critics and also perhaps on the part of Ellison himself, over what becomes of communal notions of blackness when this improvisation of selfhood is taken to the Rinehartian extremes which are ultimately rejected by Ellison and the narrator. For instance, Walton Muiyumba seems to support the interpretation of Rinehart as a near-ideal model of selfhood in *Invisible Man* insofar as he represents a jazz aesthetic when he reads Rinehart as “an improvisation, an experiment,

an expression of possibilities outside of essentialism” (73). Jimoh interprets Rinehart as “Ellison’s Jazz character,” in contrast to the narrator as “Blues character” (148).

Andrew Radford similarly finds Rinehart to being metaphorically linked to jazz improvisation, but is skeptical regarding Ellison’s endorsement of Rinehartism as a model of self-creation. He writes that Rinehart “provides an essential commentary on Ellison’s faith in improvisation,” but ultimately finds that, for Rinehart, “improvisation becomes overwhelming perplexity” and results in the “ultimate diffusion and loss of self” (59, 61). This points us to central questions of the novel: Ellison clearly believes that there are lessons to be learned from Rinehart’s improvisatory self-creation, but how can Rinehart’s freedom be achieved without this loss of self, and without a loss of community? And does Rinehart really have the ability to define himself, or has he simply learned to exploit the possibilities afforded by an invisibility which is ultimately determined by white people? These questions remains elusive for critics, as they do in the novel for Ellison and his narrator, who declares, “I felt that somewhere between Rinehart and invisibility there were great possibilities” (510). A meta-black conception of identity, specifically as it is elaborated in the figure of Louis Armstrong in the novel, can offer us some insight into Ellison’s attempt to find this space between Rinehart and invisibility, to determine the “next phase” beyond Rinehartism (576).

Given Ellison’s description of Rinehart as a man whose “world was possibility and he knew it,” he might seem, on the surface, to represent a prototype of meta-black identity as I have outlined it (498). After all, Rinehart “the rounder” creates a home for himself in the world by moving in and out of various identities, many of them associated with negative stereotypes of black masculinity (the black man as street hustler, gambler,

and as hypersexualized lover and perhaps even pimp). Jimoh perceptively observes this meta- nature of Rinehart's character when she describes him as "a principle of chaotic life, which is mastered through shifting--and often exploitative images" (150). And indeed, the narrator does learn important lessons from this aspect of Rinehart, perhaps most succinctly expressed in his revelation that "You could actually make yourself anew. The notion was frightening, for now the world seemed to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility" (499). However, Rinehart is all image, as the narrator acknowledges, whereas the meta-blackness that the narrator is moving toward balances an engagement with this image-based, hypervisible blackness as it circulates in the popular imaginary (both positively and negatively), with a "recognition of necessity," the necessity of living in the material world within the raced black body.

The persona of Rinehart is entirely hypervisible, and thus it follows that when he initially dons Rinehart's glasses and hat, the invisible man is excited to be finally "recognized" by the people around him, even if the recognition is false. However, he becomes discouraged when he cannot manipulate the hypervisible aspects of blackness that he inhabits, and they instead begin to manipulate him. For example, when he approaches his friend Brother Maceo in the Jolly Dollar bar dressed as Rinehart, a misunderstanding leads the two men to the verge of violence, and the narrator laments, "Here I'd set out to test a disguise on a friend and now I was ready to beat him to his knees--not because I wanted to but because of place and circumstance" (489). And even when he adopts an ostensibly more positive manifestation of Rinehart, the religious leader Reverend B.P. Rinehart, the narrator feels a "nameless despair" upon interacting



with two women who attend his church, and he wants to “tell them that Rinehart was a fraud” (497). Ellison describes these two women as “motherly old women of the southern type,” and thus they seem to represent a connection to black history and community, a connection Rinehart clearly lacks.

Ellison’s narrator may not consciously understand that this lack of a connection to the material history and embodied experience of blackness is what he finds disturbing about Rinehart, but Ellison implies as much when he writes “beneath it all something about Rinehart bothered me, darted just beneath the surface of my mind; something that had to do with me intimately” (501). Thus, the ultimate paradox of the philosophy of Rinehartism: it represents the attractive potential of individual freedom, but this freedom comes at the expense of communal identification. This paradox has also informed critical assessments of the novel, with John S. Wright echoing this anxiety around the issue of communal black identity when he writes that “Unlike Rinehart, . . . whose own ingenuity knows no moral boundaries and no human loyalties, Jack-the-Bear commits himself to community” (“Shadowing Ralph Ellison” 158). Steve Pinkerton speaks to a similar concern for community when he writes that “Rinehart is no role model; he is merely an embodiment of the extreme *possibilities* of African American (non)identity, minus that commitment to the collective which for Ellison is the responsibility of all democratic subjects, especially of the artist” (198-199).

Given this general agreement on the part of critics that the pure improvisation of self as represented by Rinehart must be tempered with some sense of form or engagement with the material realities of black existence, and given Ellison’s return to Armstrong’s aesthetic in the epilogue, it is surprising that so few critical analyses of Ellison’s mode of

self-creation turn to Armstrong as Ellison's representation of this space "between" Rinehart and improvisation.<sup>xxvii</sup> And even in analysis that pays attention to Armstrong as model for Ellisonian black identity, relatively little heed is paid to the fact of the technologically mediated and duplicated nature of Armstrong's bookending of the novel. Yet as we have seen, it is specifically in Ellison's deployment of Armstrong the audiovisual icon, an Armstrong presented *in stereo*, that we may find Ellison's provisional resolution for black subjects of this dichotomy between pure improvisation and communal identification. Whether or not Ellison himself would have been receptive to such a characterization, the novel elaborates a meta-black mode of identity.<sup>xxviii</sup> An Ellisonian meta-blackness engages with and ultimately exceeds blackness as it circulates in the popular imaginary, sampling mediated simulacra of blackness as the basis for the sort of forward-looking communal identity that scholars like Warren argue loses relevance shortly after the publication of *Invisible Man*.

## Conclusion

At the time that Ellison was composing *Invisible Man*, interpretations of Armstrong and his career often tended to fall on one side or the other of the binary of minstrel and revolutionary, a tendency that Ellison lamented.<sup>xxix</sup> In a 1959 essay, Ellison finds fault with bop artists' resentment toward Armstrong, "whom (confusing the spirit of his music with his clowning) they considered an Uncle Tom" (247). Ellison then lists what he sees as some of these young artists' "myths and misconceptions" to which Armstrong might have offered a substantial corrective (247-248). In Ellison's view, these artists believed that "to be truly free they must act exactly the opposite of what white

people might believe, rightly or wrongly, a Negro to be” and that “the performing artist can be completely and absolutely free of the obligations of the entertainer” (248). As he emerged as a film and television star, Armstrong stood at a particularly precarious position in relation to this artist-entertainer binary in the years leading up to the publication of *Invisible Man*.<sup>xxx</sup> The complexity of Armstrong’s legacy, particularly the multiple potential readings of the import of this mid-twentieth-century moment in his career, must inevitably find its way into any assessments of the meaning of the “character” of Armstrong in the novel, forcing readers to ask, with Steven Tracy, “who was Armstrong: the revolutionary jazz performer or the smiling image before the mainstream American public?” (99).

Tracy’s answer to this quandary is “both, the trickster using a mask to make his forays across social and musical boundaries without exposing himself to too much danger in the process” (99). I concur. But I would add that we must acknowledge that for both Armstrong and Ellison’s narrator, these forays across boundaries are made in large part via the circuits of mass-mediated communications. The goal of these forays, moreover, is not merely to avoid danger, but also to articulate a subjectivity and to *communicate* it across these social and musical boundaries. After all, Ellison’s protagonist has effectively avoided the societal dangers that impose themselves upon him throughout the novel by holing up underground, but having “whipped it all except the mind,” he concludes, “I must come out, I must emerge” (580, 581). Describing himself as “a disembodied voice,” he feels it to be his responsibility to “try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through,” closing with the now-famous rhetorical question, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you? (581).

In emerging from his hole, in speaking stereophonically on these lower frequencies, Ellison's narrator speaks to the necessity for black subjects to live in the world and to articulate and communicate subjectivities in this world, in spite of the fact that others tend to "see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination--indeed, everything and anything except me" (3). Here again, the meaning of Ellison's Armstrong in the narrative comes into focus. As Ellison's narrator realizes while listening to Armstrong's music in the prologue, "this familiar music had demanded action," and he goes on to define his hibernation as "a covert preparation for a more overt action" (12, 13). He hints that this action may be "to make music of invisibility," an echo of the moment earlier in the prologue when he describes Louis Armstrong as having "made poetry out of being invisible" (14, 8). This subtle rewording is significant: the written document that is the novel represents the narrator's attempt to make music out of invisibility, and Armstrong's music represents his attempt to make poetry (a form relying, unlike music, primarily on words) out of the condition of invisibility. This transmedial<sup>xxx</sup> approach to identity, the idea of Ellison's novel as music, of Armstrong's music as poetry, this play in the interstitial space between the audible and (simultaneously in- and hyper-) visible self, is central to Ellison's version of a meta-black identity.

His narrator learns to approach identity "through division. . . . I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love" (580). And in his fearless sampling from iconic and stereotypical images and sounds of blackness, Ellison articulates a meta-black identity, a blackness that, evoking the various meanings of the "stereo-," is simultaneously solid and simulated. *Invisible Man*, then, does not reside wholly in the Jim Crow past, signifying the "end" of African American literature and identity and serving as an outmoded and

ossified “reminder” of black humanity. Nor does it present a Rinehartian future of “infinite possibilities” as a *fait accompli*, making a post-black declaration of absolute individual freedom (576).<sup>xxxii</sup> Ellison instead situates his version of black identity pragmatically in the present, a present where identity can indeed be performed and creatively built. But in this present, the sounds, images, and ideas of blackness as they circulate in the popular imaginary are substantial pieces of the material with which identity is built. And further, the circuits of mass-mediated technology are largely the medium through which this identity is performed. In short, blackness in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century present remains fraught with material (sometimes dire) consequences, even as it is invested with imaginative (and perhaps emancipatory) possibility. Recognizing this ambivalent duality, Ellison takes blackness “meta-,” elaborating a blackness that samples stereotype to subvert it, that hijacks reproductive technology to draw into question the very existence of an original, “authentic” copy--a blackness that simultaneously “is” and “ain’t.”

At the end of *Invisible Man*, Ellison’s protagonist asks, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” and thereby invokes both the difficulties and possibilities of interracial communication in a mass-mediated society. Chapter Three explores this question – as timely today as ever – by putting the work of James Baldwin and Jack Kerouac in conversation, a conversation that often unravels in a “meta-” fashion, mediated by the stereotypes of blackness and whiteness circulating in popular culture, and music in particular.

### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Of course, it also bears noting that one reason why Ellison cites Armstrong as a central figure in his novel in 1952 is that he did not approve of the developments in bebop occurring in the jazz world at the time.

<sup>ii</sup> Warren's provocatively titled *What Was African American Literature?*, derived in large part from his 2007 W.E.B. Du Bois lecture at Harvard University and building upon the arguments he makes in *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism*, has sparked a lively debate that has extended from the world of academics (a forum in *PMLA* and a special issue of *African American Review* growing out of a Modern Language Association roundtable) to more mainstream forums (a symposium in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and a public online live chat between Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Warren sponsored by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*).

<sup>iii</sup> As Walter Benn Michaels, a prominent supporter of Warren's argument, describes these differences in Warren's book, "The writing of the Jim Crow period itself was [. . .] 'prospective'--oriented toward the goal of a future in which Jim Crow would be overcome. African American writing now is 'retrospective'--occasionally nostalgic for the racial solidarity achieved during (actually enforced by) segregation itself, and usually committed to remembering the abuses of the past as the key to understanding and overcoming those of the present" (Edwards and Benn Michaels).

<sup>iv</sup> Moten views blackness as essentially performative, arguing that "[t]he cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place" (177), and emphasizes the possibilities for resistance in performances of contemporary black identity against this background. In contrast, the so-called Afro-pessimists, following in large part from Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, argue for the persistence of a social death forged in slavery and, finding that modernity itself is premised in fundamental ways upon the denial of black humanity, argue against black communal identity as a basis for resistance. Shelby seeks a middle ground of sorts, arguing against black cultural autonomy, but aiming to identify an "oppression-centered conception of black solidarity" in the realm of politics (4).

<sup>v</sup> It also importantly risks ignoring the ways that criminal justice is unevenly enforced (to say the least) along racial lines in the United States. Many of the most forceful critiques of Warren's argument cite Michelle Alexander's notion of the "New Jim Crow" maintained by the criminal justice system, and her argument that we have in effect created a "new racial caste system" in which "[w]hat has changed since the collapse of the Jim Crow system has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it" (2-3).

<sup>vi</sup> While the term "post-black" has become commonplace in the wake of Touré's *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now*, we should not overlook its antecedents in Trey Ellis's "The New Black Aesthetic," and Nelson George's term "Post-Soul," coined in *Buppies, B-boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes On Post-Soul Black Culture*.

<sup>vii</sup> Warren further connects this tendency in analysis of *Invisible Man* to a larger trend among critics to assume "that music rather than literature has been the most politically powerful cultural force wielded by black Americans in the struggle against inequality" ("So Black and Blue" 25).

<sup>viii</sup> A. Yemisi Jimoh traces the influences of music in the text beyond the blues-jazz dichotomy, observing how Ellison "inculcates his novel with both Spiritual-Gospel and

Blues philosophy,” and also “employs Jazz philosophy,” though she argues that Ellison is ultimately unable to fully embrace the “fragmented” nature of Jazz philosophy.

<sup>ix</sup> In spite of the fact that Ellison was notorious for his obsessive revision.

<sup>x</sup> John S. Wright, for example, has observed that one of the key factors separating *Invisible Man* from other novels of its era is its “absorption with the immediate effects of the technological environment on the human imagination and spirit and on the blurring line between reality and illusion, the natural and the artificial” (“‘Jack the Bear’ Dreaming” 185). Johnnie Wilcox has also recently made the provocative claim that the novel “traces the narrator’s gradual transformation into a black cyborg as a result of his several exposures to electricity,” and finds electricity to provide a metaphor for the novel’s iteration of black identity, finding that in the world of the novel, “Blackness is neither performed nor embodied: it is transduced” (987, 1003).

<sup>xi</sup> While there has been relatively little critical engagement with the intersections of music and technology in *Invisible Man*, notable and recent exceptions include the work of Alexander Weheliye and Mark Goble. Weheliye terms Ellison one of the principal theorists of what he calls “Afro-sonic modernity,” in which the aural, and the technologically reproduced aural in particular, holds great possibility in articulating black subjectivity in the face of the subjection to be found in the realm of the visual (106). Weheliye’s reading of the prologue to *Invisible Man* is deftly handled and compelling; however, I would argue that he somewhat too easily separates the visual and the sonic, figuring the aural as a realm of potential liberation and the scopic as one of stultifying subjection. I would claim, instead, that it is precisely the difficulty to be found in maintaining fixed boundaries between the sonic and the scopic from the mid-twentieth century on that led Ellison to choose Armstrong, emerging at this time as a profoundly (and divisively) audiovisual cultural icon, to play such a prominent role in his narrator’s dawning self-consciousness. Goble’s discussion of Ellison’s interest in sound technology is also very interesting, as he points out the “double logic” in what he terms Ellison’s “aesthetic of ‘fidelity’ that assumes a prior, absent scene of sound that only technology, by way of the most ornate circuits of mediation, can reproduce” (162). Goble’s analysis is illuminating, and it leads me to explore the extent to which it is the very act of slipping into the breaks between fidelity and mediation, authenticity and simulation that comprises Ellison’s groundbreaking take on contemporary black identity.

<sup>xii</sup> Armstrong also had, like Ellison, a strong personal interest in technology. Krin Gabbard notes that Armstrong was “fascinated with gadgets all his life. . . . Whenever a technological device came on the market, Armstrong was among the first to purchase it” (96). In particular, Gabbard notes Armstrong’s interest in record players (which he always brought on tour), typewriters (he was a prolific letter writer), and tape recorders (he recorded himself playing but also hours of conversation and monologues).

<sup>xiii</sup> Armstrong’s transformation into iconic bandleader, singer, and entertainer began with his recordings as leader of Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five and Hot Seven in the mid-1920s. However, as Teachout observes, “The original Hot Five performed together in public only once” (98), and the 1947 Town Hall performance in New York City that led Armstrong and manager Joe Glaser to formally create the All Stars was “the first time

since 1926 that [Armstrong] had appeared in public as the leader of a small group of his own" (262).

<sup>xiv</sup> The argument could be made that in selecting the song "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue," originally recorded in 1929, Ellison is looking back to an earlier, more innovative portion of Armstrong's career. It is interesting to note, though, that the song began to appear more frequently in Armstrong's performance repertoire beginning with a 1947 Carnegie Hall performance split half and half between his big band and smaller ensemble. Thus, the song itself bridges the earlier big band Armstrong with the iconic bandleader of the 40s and 50s.

<sup>xv</sup> We should note the role that Armstrong's performances in the black stage revue *Hot Chocolates*, starting at Connie's Inn in Harlem and later moving to Broadway, played in his emergence as a mainstream pop entertainer, which thus facilitated his entry into the world of film and television. Teachout notes that while "*Hot Chocolates* [did not make] him a superstar, . . . it did give him a toehold in the white world, and it also gave him a pop song ['Ain't Misbehavin'] that was the perfect vehicle for his ebullient singing and playing" (140). The song "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue" was also composed by Andy Razaf and Fats Waller for *Hot Chocolates*. Originally conceived as a "dark-skinned lady's lament about losing in the game of love to lighter rivals," Armstrong altered the lyrics of the song in his recorded version, refiguring it as "what has long been regarded as a 'protest song'" (Morganstern 111). This provides yet another example of Armstrong's working from within the realm of popular entertainment and stereotype to express political commentaries and adds another layer of resonance to Ellison's meta-invocation of this Armstrong record in his novel.

<sup>xvi</sup> This discomfort with the filmic Armstrong persists in the critical literature. As Gabbard points out, "Especially today when jazz canonizers have defined Armstrong as a revolutionary artist, his films are probably ignored to sidestep troubling questions about stage mannerisms that are invisible on the fetishized recordings" (205).

<sup>xvii</sup> Despite the fact that Armstrong was viewed by many of the bebop artists of the 1950s as aesthetically retrograde, he was actually a more outspoken critic of Jim Crow than is sometimes remembered. For example, he took a strong and public stand in 1957 when he spoke out against President Eisenhower's initial refusal to force Arkansas' Little Rock Central High School to integrate. This stand by Armstrong, in which he made strategic use of his position of celebrity by marshaling the mass media, had reverberations in the US State department, who feared that his comments might be used in Soviet propaganda. Given that at the time, Armstrong "was regarded as perhaps the most effective goodwill ambassador" that the US had, his comments held significant weight. (Teachout 332).

<sup>xviii</sup> In light of the televisual turn occurring in Armstrong's career (and American society at large) at this time, the famous passage in which Ellison's narrator declares that "[i]t is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass" may resonate in ways that have not yet been critically considered. It is interesting to consider, for example, whether this "distorting glass" may have been Ellison's intentional evocation of a television screen.



<sup>xix</sup> It is also relevant to this discussion in that there has been a good deal of critical conversation around the film, and so it is an instructive example in pointing up critics' discomfort with the minstrel undertones of Armstrong's emergence into the filmic sphere.

<sup>xx</sup> In his analysis of the film, Donald Bogle finds that "The sequence conforms to the traditional stereotypes of African-Americans in films: the hardworking, long-suffering, crankily domineering black woman in conflict with her triflin', good-for-nothing, lazy man" (154). Bogle links the similarity of *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue*'s depiction of this male-female dynamic to the similarly stereotypical roles played by Hattie McDaniel and Stepin Fetchit in the 1934 film *Judge Priest*, as well as McDaniel's and Paul Robeson's roles in *Show Boat* (1936).

<sup>xxi</sup> Stein also notes this tendency on the part of critics to "[argue] about this film that Armstrong transcends the minstrel primitivism through his charismatic singing, artistic trumpeting, and the virility of the performance." However, Stein himself ultimately claims that it is "more plausible . . . to argue that audiences were again confronted with productive ambiguities, with a performance that allowed (and still allows!) Armstrong's more enthusiastic admirers to focus on its transcendent aspects while it enabled others to indulge in its minstrel echoes" (217-218).

<sup>xxii</sup> Ellison was involved in radical Left politics in his younger years, but the familiar reading of *Invisible Man*, based in large part on Ellison's characterization of The Brotherhood, is that of a fairly conservative rejection of Communism. Barbara Foley has recently troubled this reading, however, uncovering the influence of Ellison's experiences with the political Left on the composition of the novel (and observing how these influences were intentionally obscured given the novel's Cold War release). Foley argues that the novel "emerged only after a protracted, and torturous, wrestling down of his former political radicalism" (2).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Anderson's version of the song was recorded by white folk singer and folklorist Paul Clayton, a major figure in the folk music revival of the 1950s and 60s.

<sup>xxiv</sup> A. Yemisi Jimoh also points out the influence that Wheatstraw's iconic "alliance-with-the-devil attitude" has on subsequent blues musicians such as Robert Johnson, as well as the long history this sort of association with the devil has in African American folklore (15).

<sup>xxv</sup> O'Meally has noted that the lyrics Wheatstraw sings in the novel are drawn from Count Basie and Jimmy Rushing's "Boogie Woogie Blues" (87).

<sup>xxvi</sup> Shifts in the urbanization of the African American population at this time additionally go hand in hand with these technological changes. The 1950s mark the decade when African Americans first became a majority urban population.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Andrew Radford represents one exception to this, reading Armstrong, with his "musical credo [that] posits a buoyant expectation of dialogue, keen anticipation of movement and openness to myriad influence" as a potential solution to the problem posed by Rinehart (129).

<sup>xxviii</sup> Indeed, the case has been persuasively made that a significant piece of Ellison's intention in writing *Invisible Man* was to elaborate an American, rather than an exclusively African American, identity. Albert Murray famously writes that the novel is "a prototypical story about being not only a twentieth century American but also a

twentieth century man, the Negro's obvious predicament symbolizing everybody's essential predicament" (167). I would argue, however that the two things, expressing an American and African American identity (and further, a more general human identity) need not be mutually exclusive. In addition to speaking to the American and human condition, Ellison is fundamentally concerned with communicating a distinctly African American condition, the experience of living as a black person in America. And I argue that he is also concerned with elaborating, for his black audience, pragmatic strategies for navigating life in America and in a world that devalues and distorts blackness, and that this is what my notion of meta-blackness may be useful in illuminating.

<sup>xxix</sup> Thankfully, contemporary scholarship on Armstrong tends to be more nuanced. However, we can still hear echoes of this sort of Manichean take on Armstrong's career in relatively recent academic writing. For instance, Donald Bogle finds that, Armstrong's "film work distorted his accomplishments and his place in cultural history" (148). In a recent study of music's role in defining American national identity, Charles Hiroshi Garrett finds Armstrong to have been a representative figure of the first African American Great Migration of the 1920s, "whose recordings gave voice to the experiences, hopes, and strivings of a marginalized community" (83), but Garrett argues that later in Armstrong's career, he lost his connection with an authentic African American experience: "By continuing to revisit nostalgic themes about the old South and failing to speak directly to the contemporary black experience, Armstrong eventually lost his symbolic position as a beacon of modern progress" (116).

<sup>xxx</sup> Daniel Stein provides further evidence for the divisiveness of Armstrong as public figure around the time that *Invisible Man* was published, pointing out that for many, Armstrong's appearance in the 1949 Mardi Gras parade as King of the Zulus (in blackface makeup and a grass skirt), along with his appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine that same year, stand as "fault lines separating the musician's culturally and politically relevant phase from a kind of post-Edenic, fallen state in which he pandered shamelessly to the minstrel mode, grinning on television and playing the Sambo for his white mainstream audience" (255).

<sup>xxxi</sup> I borrow the term "transmedial" from Stein's study of what he calls the autobiographical narratives put forth by Armstrong across aural, visual, and written media. Describing what he terms Armstrong's "transmedial impulse, Stein writes that Armstrong is "communicating similar ideas and sentiments in and through different media. He performs his life story in every medium at his disposal" (23). I argue that it is exactly this transmedial approach to self-creation that leads Ellison to invoke a technologically mediated and duplicated Armstrong in his novel.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Interestingly, Touré uses Rinehart's language when he declares that "[w]e are in a post-Black era where the number of ways of being Black is infinite" (20). Like Ellison, Touré also takes up technological metaphors in making his case for a new mode of black identity. The apotheosis of his case for post-blackness may come when he declares that it is "as if we're computers that have been working with personas powered by an operating system called Blackness 9.0 that has amazing creativity but still has some limits on what you can do. Then post-Blackness comes along, offering a revolutionary OS called Person 10.0, which allows you to customize everything, even the operating system itself" (55).

However, pushing this metaphor just a bit further, I would argue that Ellison would note the impossibility of a conversion from “Blackness” to “Person,” given the way that blackness and representations of blackness are fundamentally embedded in the “code” that underlies our society and ourselves.

### CHAPTER 3

#### **"MY IMAGE OF YOU IS NOW STRANGE": JAMES BALDWIN, JACK KEROUAC, AND THE CHANGING MEANING OF THE MID-20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY COLOR LINE"**

Where Ralph Ellison has famously described black music as a model of democracy and of an assimilative mode of communication across the color line, I have also demonstrated his modeling of a meta-mode of black subjectivity aimed towards his black readership. But even so, while Ellison may have been cynical at times about white interest in black culture and music, he was far more optimistic about the communicative possibilities of black music than was his contemporary James Baldwin, at least by the 1960s. Baldwin certainly did acknowledge the fact that he wrote to a largely white readership, and there were messages about the American racial situation that he desperately wanted to communicate to these audiences with his essays, short stories, and novels. However, by the late 1960s he had become quite skeptical of white embrace of black culture, especially black music. In her analysis of Baldwin's invocation of black female soul singers in his writing, Emily Lordi finds that during the 60s, Baldwin "pushes back against the national embrace of black music by reasserting the music's marginal status and privileging black listeners" (99). And, for a time anyway, some of the most prominent culturally appropriative figures that Baldwin felt the need to push back against were Beat generation writers, such as Jack Kerouac.

Critical analyses of depictions of black people and black music in the writings of Jack Kerouac and other members of the Beat Generation have tended to follow Baldwin in their focus on the primitivizing tendencies of Kerouac and others' treatment of black culture and characters.<sup>i</sup> Jon Panish claims that, "The white writers of the 1950s . . . do

not see the ‘other’ (in this case, mostly African Americans) for what he or she is--a person just like any other who is involved in the complex relations of his or her culture--but as a static, unreal image” (108). But while writers like Kerouac may not “see” the black musicians they write about, Panish’s use of the visual metaphor is revealing. Notably, the writings of Beats like Kerouac are littered with references to the eyes and gazes of black characters. For instance, Kerouac includes repeated descriptions of the eclectic jazz musician Slim Gaillard in *On The Road* “looking” and “dreaming” “over the heads” of his audience, and of Lester Young with “eternity in his huge eyelids” (176, 251). And he describes Charlie Parker (as his narrator Leo Percepied imagines him) in the 1958 novella *The Subterraneans*, “looking into my eye looking to search if really I was that great writer I thought myself to be” (14).

Yet, despite this preponderance of representations of the black gaze on the white subject in Kerouac, most critical writing on Kerouac and the Beats and their representations of black characters and black music has either argued for or against the racializing and primitivizing gaze of white characters upon black characters, and/or debated the appropriative nature of Kerouac’s use of black music. By contrast, I aim to put Kerouac’s representations of race relations and black music into conversation with those of his African American contemporary James Baldwin, taking as my premise that we may gain important insights into the nature of race in mid- to late-20th century America by examining representations of the black gaze as it “looks back” at these white characters and authors. Through these depictions of interactions across the color line, Kerouac shows a concern with the tension between stereotype and black subjects as embodied individuals. While he often depicts these characters in the light of stereotypes,

his engagement with this tension is self-conscious and his depiction of these characters more nuanced than it is usually taken to be. Kerouac explores the tension between the racializing gaze that fixes identity, and the physical reality of the presence of the body and complex subjectivity of the other. This is not to say that Kerouac's depictions of black characters and black music in his fiction reveal anything especially profound about black subjectivity; however, they do tell us something about whiteness as racial identity in the mid-20th century. These depictions reveal in particular a growing consciousness on the part of Kerouac and others of the ontological emptiness of whiteness as an identity, an emptiness that we find through the meta- engagements (meta- in the way that they are filtered, often consciously, through the lens of stereotype) with black characters in his fiction.

While the late Baldwin is again far more skeptical of the potential for interracial communication than Ellison, Du Bois, and Johnson, his literary writing on popular black music attempts to theorize sound and the aural as important potential means of subating the tension between the racializing gaze and the body that Kerouac explores. This is a tension characteristic of the meta-black aesthetic that Ellison explores between blackness as it circulates, mediated through harmful stereotype, and blackness as it is materially lived. Through an analysis of his 1962 novel, *Another Country*, I will demonstrate how Baldwin explores music and the aural, and music in its mediated, recorded form, as a meta- means of navigating this tension for black subjects, and of, perhaps, communicating (albeit very incompletely) across the color line in mid-20th century America.

**“The Tyranny of His Mirror”: Stereotype and the Return of the White Male Gaze in *Another Country* and *The Subterraneans***

Baldwin was not especially impressed by Kerouac as a writer. In his essay, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” Baldwin calls Kerouac’s *On The Road* “absolute nonsense . . . and offensive nonsense at that” (278). However, he does acknowledge that “there is real pain in it, and real loss, however thin; and it is thin, like soup too long diluted; thin because it does not refer to reality, but to a dream” (278). While I do find that the Kerouac of *The Subterraneans* is a bit more aware of the interplay between the real and the imaginary in terms of racial identity, Baldwin’s point is still well-taken. But through Kerouac’s repeated references to black characters, and musicians specifically, looking at him and his white companions and the anxiety or “real pain” around his identity that this gaze creates, he may have been speaking to something larger than merely his own existential sadness. Namely, I read in these passages a creeping realization of the unreality of whiteness as identity, a realization brought on for Kerouac by finding himself the object of the black gaze. Confirming the reality behind the gaze described by Kerouac, Baldwin writes, “I have spent most of my life . . . watching white people and outwitting them, so that I might survive” (269). And a piece of what he has learned from this observation is that the dream to which he refers is that of whiteness itself, and race more generally. Baldwin writes that white men “expect the world to help them in the achievement of their identity. But the world does not do this--for anyone; the world is not interested in anyone’s identity” (279).

It is productive to view Kerouac’s depictions of black characters and interracial communication in the light of Douglas Taylor’s claim for a “crisis” of white masculinity occurring in the mid-20th century. Analyzing representations of black masculinity in the

work of Baldwin, Norman Mailer, and Eldridge Cleaver, Taylor explains the “real pain” that Kerouac might have felt and that drove Mailer to write “The White Negro.” He locates a “new investment in white masculinity” in the post-WWII era, whereby “white workers and white ethnics, as part of their rise toward the middle class, rejected those aspects of themselves that they believed indicated their low origins--dirt, physicality, sexuality, labor, enthusiasm, and spontaneity, for instance” (72). Taylor finds that these “low” aspects of the white male self were “projected” upon black males, and that this projection resulted in simultaneously desirous and disdainful feelings among white men toward black men, and similarly contradictory feelings about whiteness.<sup>ii</sup> Though Mailer’s “The White Negro” is the primary text that Taylor uses to explore white desire for black masculinity, critics have attributed the same sort of desire to Kerouac. While Kerouac, especially in *The Subterraneans*, displays at least a dawning awareness of the paradoxical nature of this desire, Taylor’s claim that beatnik texts like Kerouac’s ultimately “tell us more about the repressed fantasies of white men than they do about what it means to be black” certainly seems to hold some truth (70).<sup>iii</sup>

Rather than reading the Kerouac of *The Subterraneans* and the Baldwin of *Another Country* as countering one another, then, we can more productively read them as in conversation, as seeking neither a merging nor a complete separation of black and white, but rather a mutual recognition that acknowledges difference without dissolving it, perhaps allowing for some possibility of communication. Baldwin’s writings on this sort of recognition across difference are more developed and, I think, more consciously enacted than Kerouac. *Another Country* takes the perils and possibilities of interracial communication as one of its explicit subjects, and this focus is reflected in critical writing



on the novel. For instance, Taylor writes that “To the extent that Baldwin entertains a vision of racial reconciliation in *Another Country*, it is reconciliation without guarantees” (71). Various critics writing on the novel have differed on just how possible Baldwin views this reconciliation as being, and given his comments above about whiteness and about Kerouac’s whiteness in particular, it is not difficult to see why. For example, Kevin Ohi cautions against reading “coherent” narratives of the transcendence of racial difference into *Another Country*, writing that Baldwin denies his characters “the revelation of transcendence through self-consciousness” (280). Working from Ohi’s notion of “incoherence” in the novel, Ernesto Javier Martínez argues that “*Another Country* is preoccupied with incoherence and confusion as epistemically significant states” (783). Nick Bromell recently acknowledges this incoherence and difficulty in Baldwin’s novel, but goes even further to pose the very difficulty (and even impossibility) of truly *knowing* another as not only “epistemically significant,” but as a critical piece of Baldwin’s elaboration of a democratic conception of recognition. Bromell writes that, “*Another Country* provides a pedagogy of democratic interpersonal communication that urges its readers to understand that complete knowledge of another person is neither possible nor desirable. To know them, we have to accept and respect precisely what we cannot ever know about them” (68).

I agree with all of these authors that Baldwin is extremely skeptical of racial reconciliation, and that we should be careful not to read his version of interracial communication as complete or “coherent.” And I will also claim that we can read a similar skepticism into Kerouac’s depiction of the relationship between Leo and Mardou Fox. But to the extent that such communication is possible, both Baldwin and Kerouac

view a mutual recognition as an important precondition to such reconciliation. Putting the two authors in conversation, then, I will show how Kerouac's acknowledgment of the incompleteness of communication across racial difference and the inability of stereotype to contain black subjectivity is more developed and consciously elaborated than many critics, including Baldwin himself, often appreciate. And I will further observe how Baldwin specifically goes beyond Kerouac's acknowledgment of these difficulties of intersubjective interracial communication, and theorizes music and the aural as a space where the sort of recognition across difference articulated by Bromell might begin.

In his essays and his fiction, Baldwin focuses on the need to articulate one's identity as a black person through stereotypes of blackness, and as in *Invisible Man*, these stereotypes for Baldwin often seem to be described in terms of the visual. Initially in *Another Country*, the white gaze is portrayed by Baldwin as wielding power over black bodies. For instance, the novel opens on the jazz drummer Rufus Scott, just before his suicide, and Baldwin establishes the presence of the white institutional gaze almost immediately. As Rufus walks through Times Square, Baldwin makes note that a "policeman passed him, giving him a look" (3). Very subtly, Rufus begins to internalize this white gaze in a classic example of the downside of the double consciousness outlined by Du Bois, the "sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others" (11). Rufus recalls an earlier moment when he bought a scarf for his sister, Ida, and he remembers looking at her in the scarf, "Watching her dark face in the sunlight" and thinking to himself that "Ages and ages ago, Ida had not been merely the descendant of slaves . . . she had once been a monarch" (7). This dreamlike hindsight is interrupted by a return to the present, in which Rufus looks out into the city, and can't help seeing black

women, and perhaps Ida by extension, the way that this world, and specifically white institutional power in the person of the policeman, sees her. Baldwin writes: “he looked out of the window, at the air shaft, and thought of the whores on Seventh Avenue. He thought of the white policemen and the money they made on black flesh, the money the whole world made” (7).

This link between the white gaze and the black flesh is by no means coincidental, and Baldwin returns to the connection between vision and the body repeatedly. The Baldwinian gaze is closely linked with touch. This represents a phenomenological conception of vision in which the black internalization of the white gaze as outlined by earlier thinkers such as Du Bois and Fanon is complemented and complicated by the sort of gaze discussed by existential philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty frames the way that sight functions in the human experience of the world, when he writes, “he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at. As soon as I see, it is necessary that the vision (as is so well indicated by the double meaning of the word) be doubled with a complementary vision or with another vision: myself seen from without, such as another would see me” (252). Merleau-Ponty thus describes the reciprocal nature of human vision, explicitly connecting sight to touch, writing that “vision is a palpation with the look” (252).

We see a particularly striking example of this palpating gaze in another early scene in *Another Country*. As Rufus is making love to his Southern white girlfriend Leona for the first time, Baldwin writes, “everything he did he watched himself doing” (21). Then, he launches into a description of the act, which sounds as though it may be what Rufus imagines seeing (blurred, in a manner that recalls Du Bois’s double

consciousness, with what he imagines a presumably white other to see) as he watches himself make love to a white woman:

[N]othing could have stopped him, not the white God himself, nor a lynch mob arriving on wings. Under his breath he cursed the milk-white bitch and groaned and rode his weapon between her thighs . . . A moan and a curse tore through him while he beat her with all the strength he had and felt the venom shoot out of him, enough for a hundred black-white babies” (22).

Rufus’s gaze here is not simply doubled, as Du Bois would have it. He seems to be almost possessed in this passage by a racist other, and his experience of himself and his body is mediated through the lens of stereotype that transfigures his physical passion into physical violence threatening Leona’s white womanhood. Further, when Rufus is later walking with Leona, he describes feeling as though “Villagers, both bound and free, looked them over as though where they stood were an auction block or a stud farm” (29). Here, Rufus literally becomes bound to this internalized white gaze, as he analogizes his inability to escape the penetration of the white gaze to enslavement.

Baldwin thus describes Rufus as being confined by the hypervisibility of his black body in the white gaze. He describes Rufus’s white friend Vivaldo, on the other hand, as being effectively invisible, or if not invisible, as somehow protected by his whiteness from the palpation of the outside gaze. As Rufus and Leona walk through the park with Vivaldo and a white woman he is dating, Vivaldo gets in a little argument with his date. The onlookers in the park respond with “a tolerant smile,” and this causes Baldwin to

write (focalized through Rufus), “No one dared look at Vivaldo, out with any girl whatever, the way they looked at Rufus now; nor would they ever look at the girl the way they looked at Leona. The lowest whore in Manhattan would be protected as long as she had Vivaldo on her arm. This was because Vivaldo was white” (31). Rufus believes that Vivaldo’s whiteness (and specifically, his white masculinity) acts as a sort of shield against unwanted outside gazes and judgment.

Black men are not the only ones whom Baldwin depicts as being forced to negotiate their identities in the face of the stereotyping white gaze. Ida Scott, Rufus’s younger sister, begins dating Vivaldo after Rufus’s death, and through Baldwin’s rendering of their relationship, we see Vivaldo fluctuating between viewing her as a person and a stereotype. First, as he lies with her, he seems to be observing her body in a nuanced manner, noting to her, “I love your colors. You’re so many different, crazy colors” (175). But as he goes on, and the two move closer to lovemaking, he tells her, “Part of you is honey, part of you is copper, some of you is gold-- . . . Part of you is black, too, like the entrance to a tunnel” (175). As he enters this black “tunnel,” Vivaldo veers into the realm of stereotype. Describing Vivaldo’s inner thoughts during sex, Baldwin writes, “he felt that he was traveling up a savage, jungle river, looking for the source which remained hidden just beyond the black, dangerous, dripping foliage” (177). Thus, while the body initially seems to offer promise of true understanding between Vivaldo and Ida, as they become increasingly physically close, Vivaldo seems to lose sight of her as a human being, instead seeing through the lens of stereotype.

Similarly, in Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*, as the white male protagonist Leo grows more and more romantically entangled with the black Mardou Fox, we see him increasingly vacillating between the poles of viewing Mardou through the lens of stereotype and interacting with her as a nuanced individual. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon observes that, "the Other, the white man, . . . had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories" (91), and the moments when Leo is viewing Mardou primarily through stereotype read much like the sort of woven psychic tapestry that Fanon describes. I argue, however, that Kerouac engages consciously with this dichotomy between the physical and imaginary. For instance, Kerouac describes Leo waking one morning "from the scream of the beermares and see beside me the Negro woman with parted lips sleeping, and little bits of white pillow stuffing in her black hair, feel almost revulsion" (17). This image is that of the black woman as sexualized whore, and Nancy Grace has appropriately classified this depiction of Mardou as "grotesque" (51). The "bits of white pillow stuffing in her black hair" seem to me to be an evocative detail here. Perhaps what is so repulsive to Leo about Mardou is not merely her blackness, but its contrast against the whiteness of the pillow stuffing (and his own whiteness, of course, by extension). The terror Leo feels at this mixing of black and white is underlined as Kerouac goes on to describe the noise outside the apartment "sneaking in through the gray window, a gray doomsday in August" (17).

However, along with the terror that Leo experiences at the blurring of the black-white racial binary that occurs in this passage and the grotesque stereotypes that he projects upon Mardou, Kerouac also expresses through his narrator a perhaps surprising amount of self-consciousness regarding the unreality of his stereotypical vision of

Mardou. First, he describes this vision of Mardou as occurring in a sort of liminal state between sleep (and nightmare) and waking. This, combined with the fact that immediately after Leo expresses his revulsion at Mardou's body he immediately "realize[s] what a beast I am for feeling anything near it," suggests that Kerouac may be a bit more conscious about his invocation of racial stereotype here than many give him credit for. It seems to me that he is attempting to show the way that his narrator is engaged in a struggle between his psychic projections surrounding blackness and the material reality of the black body and subjectivity before him. This reading is further bolstered by the fact that this passage is immediately preceded by Kerouac directly speaking to the constructed nature of his narrative, and the tension between reality and rhetoric. He writes, "And so having had the essence of her love now I erect big word constructions and thereby betray it really," and later writes of rushing off from the "essence" of "the thighs" to "construct construct" (17). I am not interested in trying to defend the misogynist essentialism of his treatment of woman as "essence," but I think that the point holds that Kerouac is consciously making sure that his reader is attuned to the "constructed" nature of the representation of Mardou that follows.

For both authors, then, the black gaze upon white subjects seems to be critical to revealing the constructed nature of their "whiteness," even to the point of effecting a sort of double consciousness of whiteness, whereby these white men begin to see themselves through the eyes of racialized others. Both authors suggest that their white male characters are simultaneously attracted to and frightened by this revelation, the "poisoned gift of modernity," as Du Bois termed the phenomenon of his "second-sight" (10). Baldwin addresses this paradox of white subjectivity in *The Fire Next Time*, writing of

“the white man’s profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is,” and, simultaneously, his “equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror” (341). In *Another Country*, Vivaldo reflects on one of his trips uptown, a few years earlier, when he “had been spending a lot of time in Harlem, running after the whores up there” (61). As he enters a bar, he notices that while his being there doesn’t cause the black patrons to alter their behavior, “an almost imperceptible glaze came over their eyes” (62). Vivaldo seems to lament this, to yearn to be seen by these people, as he recalls that, “This was the night that he saw their eyes unglaze” (62). A girl approaches him, and they go back to her place, but as they are beginning to undress, her “husband” walks in, and while Vivaldo is first disappointed and then angered by the interruption of his liaison, it was “Not until he looked into the man’s eyes [that] he began to be afraid” (62).

Vivaldo longs to be seen by black people, but when he is, this black gaze strikes fear into him, in part because he is in actual physical danger, but also in part, it seems, because the gaze threatens his self-possession. Baldwin describes the man’s gaze as literally penetrative, writing, “he stood directly before Vivaldo, his eyes still driving, it seemed, into Vivaldo’s as though he would pierce the skull and the brain and possess it all” (63-64). The man then demands that Vivaldo name his own punishment, telling him “Come on. You know what you *guys* do” (64), forcing Vivaldo to face in some small way the painful racial history of lynching. After the man takes Vivaldo’s money and sends him on his way, Baldwin writes that “The man’s eyes remained with him for a long time after the rage and the shame and terror of that evening. And were with him now, as he climbed the stairs to Rufus’ apartment” (65). Like Kerouac’s characters, perhaps Vivaldo



is not fully conscious of it, but this man's gaze causes him to at least begin to realize something about himself, and about the meaning (or lack thereof) of his whiteness. It is for this reason that the black gaze thus haunts him as he looks into the eyes of his friend Rufus, near the end of his rope, and "wonder[s] what the eyes were seeing" (66).

George Yancy focuses on disruptions of the white gaze as the most effective form of resistance to the black body's being "distorted and fixed as a pre-existing essence" (109-110). Yancy argues that resistant black bodies may refuse the recognition demanded by the white gaze, and that "Through this act of resistance, from the perspective of the white gaze, I become a living contradiction, an anomaly. I become more than whites can measure within the horizon of their limited understandings of the Black body" (114). Baldwin give us white characters who are experiencing this sort of anxiety, as black subjects gaze back and unsettle their senses of their own whiteness, and Kerouac's white characters (often very closely linked, biographically speaking, with the author himself and his friends) evince a similar anxiety, whether Kerouac intends to represent them in this fashion or not. Yancy describes the resistance to the white gaze that black subjects can effect by returning this gaze claiming that, "I now return whites to themselves, which is a place of reaction . . . By rejecting their need, I force whites into a state of anxiety. For they are forced to see the emptiness of a self dialectically predicated on a lie" (114).

One of the primary features of Frederic Jameson's "postmodern condition" is a "fragmentation of the subject" (63). He argues that this leads to a "liberation from anxiety" which is a piece of the "waning of affect" he describes as partially constitutive of the postmodern sensibility (64). I posit, however, that we can read, in authors like Kerouac, a great deal of anxiety around a racialized "white" identity, and that this anxiety

arises in part from an awareness of the fragmentation of the unitary self that comes with the postmodern moment. That is, Kerouac, and other white males at the time are experiencing, consciously or not, the constructed nature of their whiteness (and perhaps to a lesser extent, their maleness) being made bare in the black gaze. This comes at a time when, as Taylor describes the crisis in white masculinity, “White men in the post-war era began to feel ambivalent about whiteness, and to fantasize about what it would be like to be black” (97). This awareness of constructed nature of the self, along with the simultaneous desire for and rejection of the (similarly constructed) black racial “other,” produces a palpable anxiety in the work of Kerouac, Mailer, and other white writers of their generation.

### **“American As If To Say White”: Kerouac’s Haunted White Masculinity**

The fact that there are, in Kerouac’s writing, so many instances of white characters being seen and visually read by black characters seems significant, and yet as I have noted, this trope of vision in Kerouac has been given relatively little critical attention. And while we might expect that Kerouac’s characters would flee from the anxiety spurred by the sort of return of the black gaze that Yancy describes, it is the need to be released from the “tyranny of [the] mirror of whiteness” that keeps these characters engaged with these racialized others. In what follows, then, I will show, through readings of Kerouac’s depiction of jazz musician Charlie Parker and his developing characterization of Mardou, that he expresses a consciousness of the ways that his narrator’s ideas around blackness are filtered through the lens of stereotype. By ultimately giving over the narration of the novella for a period to Mardou, he

demonstrates the inability of these stereotypes (and of his literary “construction”) to contain her subjectivity. Additionally, in facing the return of the black gaze, Kerouac through his narrator at least begins to acknowledge the “lie” of whiteness as racial identity, rather than fleeing to a “de-ethnicized” whiteness as Taylor would have it.

One of the more substantial instances of the return of the black gaze comes in *The Subterraneans*, when Kerouac’s narrator Percepied and Mardou go to see Charlie Parker perform at a fictional San Francisco club called the Red Drum. Kerouac writes of Parker “distinctly digging Mardou several times also myself directly looking into my eye looking to search if really I was that great writer I thought myself to be as if he knew my thoughts and ambitions or remembered me from other night clubs and other coasts” (14). One of the few critics to read into Kerouac’s focus on Parker’s gaze in this scene, Panish finds, in keeping with his larger reading of Kerouac’s use of black characters and music, that this representation tells us more about Kerouac than about Parker. Panish writes that Kerouac “emphasizes the eyes as the locus of emotion and interaction, and suggests that the audience is somehow able to sense something about Parker’s life and his strategy for living that life by gazing into his eyes. The total effect of this representation, then, is to erase or obliterate Parker’s particularity as a symbol” (59).<sup>iv</sup>

It may indeed be true that Parker lacks depth except as a symbol in Kerouac’s representation, but I would take issue with Panish’s reading that Kerouac suggests that Parker’s audience is able to know anything of significance about Parker by gazing into his eyes. Later in this same passage, Kerouac describes Parker “digging his audience digging the eyes, the secret eyes him-watching, as he just pursed his lips and let great lungs and immortal fingers work, his eyes separate and interested and humane” (14).

Firstly, nothing here suggests that Kerouac feels that he or anyone else in the audience can sense anything of significance about Parker by looking in his eyes. Rather, the focus in this passage is on Parker “digging his audience,” watching them as he plays. And further, contrary to Panish’s reading, Kerouac specifically describes Parker’s eyes as “secret” and “separate.” So while the claim that Parker functions more for Kerouac as symbol than individual may be correct, Kerouac affords Parker a great deal of respect by preserving his discrete individuality in this scene, and not presuming to know any profound truths about the jazz musician.

In fact, rather than claiming that he or anyone else in the audience is able to “know” anything about Parker by gazing upon him or listening to him, Kerouac suggests instead that Parker is able to know things about Percepied by looking at him. While Panish suggests that Kerouac uses Parker as symbol to “enhance his own image,” it seems to me that quite the opposite is the case. First, when Kerouac describes Parker as “looking to search if really I was that great writer I thought myself to be,” I read this not as an enhancement of his image, but as an expression of his own profound self-doubts about his talents as an artist. When he goes on to suggest that it is “as if he knew my thoughts and ambitions,” it is clear that this searching to ascertain his talent as an artist does not belong to Parker so much as Percepied (and, if we are to connect the Percepied persona and the author as closely as most critics have done, Kerouac himself).

Kerouac goes on to attribute to Parker and his gaze a foreknowledge of the demise of the relationship between his narrator and Mardou. He writes that Parker watches “Mardou and me in the infancy of our love and probably wondering why, or knowing it wouldn’t last, or seeing who it was would be hurt, as now, obviously, but not quite yet, it

was Mardou whose eyes were shining in my direction, though I could not have known and now do not definitely know” (14). Nancy Grace reads this scene in effect as a battle for Mardou in which Percepied (and thus Kerouac) articulates his superiority as white male, taking the black female from the black male, and subsequently interprets Kerouac’s depiction of Parker as “kind” and “humane” at the end of the scene as a means of assuaging his white guilt over his domination of the black man (53). Of course it is Kerouac the author who wields the ultimate power over his characters here, but again, by attributing such knowledge of the fact that Mardou is soon to hurt Leo to the character of Parker, Kerouac invests this character with a great deal of power over his narrator. In fact, by setting this scene up in this particular manner, Kerouac effectively allies his reader with the black gazes of Parker and Mardou, possessing knowledge and power over the anxiety-ridden narrator. The novella itself is framed as a remembrance of the relationship, and we know from the beginning that Leo is in pain. Through his narrator, Kerouac gives his reader early bits of foreshadowing of the way that Mardou will hurt Leo, writing, for instance, very early in the text, that “not a piece of my pain has showed *yet* (2, italics mine). Thus, the reader (along with perhaps Parker and Mardou) suspects that it is Leo who will be hurt by Mardou, while Leo admits that even in the present, he does not “definitely know” what exactly was contained in these black gazes at this moment, nor what his future with Mardou would hold. It seems to me that this inability of Leo to “know” in this scene reflects the sort of anxiety of white identity that Yancy outlines.

Leo opens the novella by telling his readers, “Once I was young and had so much more orientation and could talk with nervous intelligence about everything and with

clarity and without as much literary preambing as this” (1). He subsequently goes on to inform them that, “in other words, this is the story of an unself-confident man” (1). I find that the scene with Parker unsettling Leo with his gaze marks a transitional moment in the text, hailing his transition from cocksure young white man to a man searching for an identity beyond the hollow floating signifier of whiteness. Also, this scene marks a key point in Mardou’s progression from fantasy and stereotype to more fully fleshed-out human being. Describing Leo’s thoughts when he first catches sight of Mardou, Kerouac writes that her face “made me think, ‘By God, I’ve got to get involved with that little woman’ and maybe too because she was Negro” (2). The thought contained in quotations seems to me to represent Leo’s thoughts at the time, those of a confident young white man fixing this black woman in his gaze and sure of his ability to “make it” with her. What follows, “and maybe too because she was a Negro,” seems to represent Leo the narrator, telling the story in hindsight, acknowledging his primitivizing of Mardou.

It is additionally significant that Kerouac describes Leo meeting Mardou at a bar called the “Black Mask.” Some have speculated that the Black Mask, placed in the novella in San Francisco, is a stand-in for the real-life Greenwich Village bar that Kerouac frequented and where he met Alene Lee, the woman on whom the character of Mardou is based. Examining his description of the moment when he meets this black woman who will, over the course of the novel, unsettle his conceptions of blackness and whiteness (and of himself), we should at least allow for the possibility that Kerouac’s naming of the bar is meant to refer to the black mask that Mardou wears upon their first meeting, and to prefigure his inability to see beyond it. Later in this same scene, Kerouac furthers his description of Mardou as masked and remote, writing that when they are

outside, it is “dark, you could barely see her in the dim street” (3). And again, the Leo with hindsight interjects himself into his own fantasies, writing “I wanted to kiss her . . . -having no notion of anything though” (3). This initial encounter with Mardou also marks the first moment when Leo expresses some doubt about his white male identity. Kerouac writes, “I am a Canuck, I could not speak English till I was 5 or 6, at 16 I spoke with a halting accent and was a big blue baby in school” (3). He goes on to note that had he not played high school basketball, he fears he “would have been put in the madhouse for some kind of inadequacy” (3). Here, Kerouac seems to be revealing, immediately following his first encounter with Mardou, the uncertainty lying behind his own white mask, with his French-Canadian heritage and his accent all demonstrating his “inadequacy” in playing the role of white American male in which he has been cast.

Once he has initially seen Mardou, Leo’s perception of her is further unsettled when he first hears her speak. Kerouac writes that Mardou’s tone of speech is “part Beach, part I. Magnin model, part Berkeley, part Negro highclass, something, a mixture of *langue* and style of talking and use of words I’d never heard before except in certain rare girls of course *white*” (7). This first instance of Leo hearing Mardou marks the beginning of her unsettling his fixed notions of blackness. She does not sound “black,” as he understands it, but she does not quite sound “white.” And as he goes on, Leo links the sound of her voice with bop music. Kerouac writes that upon further reflection with his friend Adam Moorad, Mardou’s was “the new bop generation way of speaking,” “a sound I had already definitely and wonderingly heard in the voice of new bop singers like Jerry [sic] Winters especially with Kenton band on the record *Yes Daddy Yes* and maybe in Jeri Southern too” (7). Jerri Winters and Jeri Southern were both white female jazz

singers of the 1950s, and with these references, Kerouac heightens the racial ambiguity that Mardou's voice sparks for Leo. Mardou, this black woman who sounds at least partially "white," is compared to two white women who perhaps might be read as sounding "black," performing in a black musical idiom.

This racial ambiguity in Mardou's voice that Leo cannot quite pinpoint again sets off uncertainty as to his own identity. Upon hearing the "Beach" (San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood) in her voice, Leo's "heart sank for the Beach has always hated me, cast me out, overlooked me, shat on me" (7). San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood, historically an Italian-American enclave, emerged in the 1950s as one of the major epicenters of the Beat movement, home to landmarks such as the City Lights bookstore. If we read this passage in light of the neighborhood's Italian American-ness, perhaps Leo feels again cast out of a socially acceptable white (albeit, an ethnicized white) identity. But Leo seems to feel equally displaced from the neighborhood's new status as bohemian artistic enclave.<sup>v</sup> Leo thinks that the Beach people read him as "some kind of hoodlum," and he admits that in the past he has fulfilled this role, as he regretfully recalls in incident in North Beach when he and one of his basketball teammates assaulted two young men, one of whom is described as "a violinist a queer" (7). Leo recalls this with the same tone of lamentation with which he opens the novella, writing "I was 18, I was a nannybeater and fresh as a daisy too" (8), and in the context of his interaction with Mardou, his past confidence dissolves in self-doubt as he acknowledges, "I of course also knew that Mardou had real genuine distrust and dislike of me as I sat there" (8).

Baz Dreisinger writes of Kerouac's depiction of Mardou that readers "never have the opportunity truly to see or hear Mardou; what we get instead are Leo's constructions



of her, complemented by her deconstructions of these same elaborate constructions” (84). I agree with her latter point that much of the Mardou we see in the text is mediated through Leo’s self-conscious constructions of her, and his descriptions of her deconstructing these constructions, though I would attribute more consciousness of this constructed-ness to Kerouac than does Dreisinger. I would also take issue with the idea that we as readers never hear Mardou. In fact, Mardou essentially takes over the narration from Leo for substantial portions of the novella. Mardou first tells Leo a story of how she “flipped,” having a nervous breakdown and wandering naked through the streets of San Francisco. As she tells this story, her voice blends with Leo’s commentary, and perhaps predictably, when Leo’s voice takes over, stereotype and essentialism pervades his description. To quote a particularly striking example, describing Mardou in the midst of her breakdown standing outside undressed, Leo figures her as a sort of archetype of primal womanhood, taking off on a rather extreme flight of primitivist fancy. He writes of seeing:

[in] Mardou’s eyes now the eventual kingdom of Inca Maya and vast Azteca shining of gold snake and temples as noble as Greek, Egypt, the long sleek crack jaws and flattened noses of Mongolian geniuses creating arts in temple rooms and the leap of their jaws so to speak, til the Cortez Spaniards, the Pizarro weary old-world sissified pantalooned Dutch bums came smashing canebrake in savannahs to find shining cities of Indian Eyes high, landscaped, boulevarded, ritualed, heralded, beflagged in that selfsame New World Sun the beating heart held up to it). (25)

The primitivism in the above passage is so obvious as to barely require comment. However, to read this passage as simply another example of Kerouac's inability or unwillingness to see racial others as individuals is to oversimplify by identifying Kerouac the writer a bit too directly with Leo the narrator. Even in the context of Kerouac's other instances of racial essentializing, this passage stands out as extreme to the point of self-parody, and given the self-consciousness that Leo has previously demonstrated about his tendencies towards such essentialism and his multiple admissions that he is an "egomaniac," I wonder whether Kerouac the author may intend for his reader to read this tangent of Leo the narrator with some degree of skepticism.

This interpretation of the passage seems to be supported by the fact that as Mardou's story goes on, her voice (relaying specific, anti-essentializing details) continually competes with Leo's for narrative primacy. A major turning point in Mardou's narrative and her emergence as non-essentialized individual comes when she describes a white man in an auto garage nearly exposing himself to her, but stopping when he becomes ashamed. Relaying this story to Leo reminds her of a recurrent sexual trauma from her childhood, when a "man would send us to the store and give us dimes then he'd open his bathrobe and show us himself" (33). Mardou quickly returns to the story of her "flip," but this brief glimpse into Mardou's childhood serves, in its brutal specificity, as a stark contrast to Leo's absurd, ahistorical essentialism, lending a psychological depth to Mardou's character, and offering up a possible concrete factor contributing to her breakdown. And as she finishes her story, Leo seems to recognize the import of Mardou's voice and individual particularity, and his connection to it:

I had never heard such a story from such a soul except from the great men I had known in my youth, great heroes of America I'd been buddies with, with whom I'd adventured and gone to jail and known in raggedy dawns, the boys beat on curbstones seeing symbols in the saturated gutter, the Rimbauds and Verlaines of America on Times Square, kids--no girl had ever moved me with a story of spiritual suffering and so beautifully her soul showing out radiant as an angel wandering in hell the selfsame streets I'd roamed in. (36)

In the book's second section, Kerouac continues to depict Leo's view of Mardou as being divided between what he sees of blackness mediated through stereotype and what he sees of Mardou as unique, discrete individual. He opens this chapter with the line, "At first I had doubts, because she was Negro" (43). As he goes on, however, it becomes gradually clear to the reader and to Leo that these "doubts," at least those that he harbors "because she was Negro," are based largely on his own psychic projections. Leo's expression of doubt refers to his imagining of the reaction of his family (his mother and his sister, specifically) to his relationship with Mardou. He worries that they would be "mortified to hell and have nothing to do with us," and goes on to worry that "it would preclude completely the possibility of living in the South, like in that Faulknerian pillar homestead in the Old Granddad moonlight I'd so long envisioned for myself" (45). The fact that this "vision" that Leo has for himself is mediated both through literature ("Faulknerian") and commercial culture ("Old Granddad" whiskey) indicates Leo's dawning consciousness that this vision is a fiction. Additionally, it is significant that he

would describe his vision of life as “Faulknerian.” Despite his complex depictions of race and miscegenation in his fiction, Faulkner resisted integration through the 1950s, and James Baldwin responded to this the year before Kerouac wrote *The Subterraneans* in an essay published in *The Partisan Review* entitled, “Faulkner and Desegregation.” Baldwin writes of the process he sees (or hopes he sees) Faulkner (and the South as a whole) going through at this time:

Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew; to what one possessed or dreamed that one possessed. Yet, it is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long cherished or a privilege he has long possessed that he is set free -- he has set himself free -- for higher dreams, for greater privileges. (209)

It is significant, then, that Kerouac invokes Faulkner at this particular historical moment, and that he does so at a point in the narrative when his narrator Leo is undergoing a similarly slow, and ultimately incomplete process of surrendering his “dreams” surrounding blackness.

Leo’s concern with what his family might think of Mardou also draws whiteness as racial identity and Leo’s connection to whiteness into question. He wonders to himself, “what would they say if my mansion lady wife was a black Cherokee, it would cut my life in half, and all such sundry awful American as if to say white ambition thoughts or

white daydreams” (45). Leo worries about his life being cut in half, but in truth, it is clear to the reader that Kerouac sees his life, and perhaps the life of American national identity, as fragmented. This fragmentation is revealed when Leo refers to his ambitions, thoughts, and daydreams as “American as if to say white.” Here, in inserting the clause “as if to say,” Kerouac reveals in his narrator a growing realization of the tenuous connection between Americanness and whiteness, and the tenuous nature of each of these identities in the face of the challenge faced by the emergent Civil Rights movement of the time.

Immediately following this acknowledgment of his own “whiteness” and of the ultimate “daydream” quality of this whiteness, Kerouac returns to the physical presence of Mardou, intimating his “Doubts galore too about her body itself” (45). He then describes a night when he and Mardou confessed everything they had been hiding from one another in the first week of their relationship, and he tells her that when he saw her naked body, “I thought I saw some kind of black thing I’ve never seen before, hanging, like it *scared* me” (45). This black hanging thing that Leo thinks he sees could be the black phallus, an imagined symbol or stereotype of all he fears in blackness. But additionally, we can’t discount the possibility that Leo is seeing a lynching in Mardou’s body, projecting the trauma of America’s racial history onto his black lover’s body. After Leo makes this confession, he and Mardou set about resolving his fear, by making a visual examination of her body together. Kerouac writes that “later in the house with light on we both of us childlike examined said body and looked closely and it wasn’t anything pernicious” (45-46).

In contrast to typical readings of the white gaze as exploitative and primitivizing, this instance of gazing seems rather tender, as Kerouac describes it not as Leo gazing at

Mardou, but as the two of them looking upon her body together. Rather than primitivizing her, this looking at Mardou effectively substitutes a more nuanced recognition of her embodied individuality for the psychically-mediated iconography of the black phallus and the spectacle of the lynching. Yancy outlines prototypical instances of the white gaze exerting power over the black body when he writes that this body, “through the hegemony of the white gaze, undergoes a phenomenological return that leaves it distorted and fixed as a pre-existing essence” (2). However, this moment of gazing in *The Subterraneans* seems not to fit into this model of the white gaze fixing the black body as essence and reinforcing the power vested in whiteness. While Leo is relieved that Mardou’s body is not as grotesque and fearsome as he had imagined in his psychic projections, his looking upon her body makes him less secure in his own identity, and his whiteness. Immediately following his examination of Mardou’s body, Leo finds that “I cannot at all possibly begin to understand who I am or what I am any more, my love for Mardou has completely separated me from any previous phantasies valuable and otherwise” (46). Thus, as Leo becomes conscious of the extent to which he has mediated his perception of Mardou through the lens of stereotyped “phantasies” of blackness, it draws his own identity as white male irrevocably into question. While I would not venture to say that Kerouac resolves this conflict for his narrator by the end of the novel, a piece what he is depicting here is the return of the white gaze upon itself, a dawning consciousness of the ultimately spectral nature of whiteness as identity.

But this dawning of a sort of white race consciousness on Leo’s part does not mark a point of resolution in the novella; rather, it marks a point of crisis, as Leo vacillates even more wildly between perceiving Mardou through the lens of primitivizing

stereotype and as discrete individual, and, perhaps predictably, their relationship begins to erode. However, as the romance decays and ultimately ends, Mardou's voice increasingly emerges in the text and in Leo's consciousness. While Leo's (and Kerouac's) race consciousness by the end of the novel remains a work in progress, to put it kindly, the Mardou that Kerouac concludes the novel with is one who exceeds his narrator's capacity to represent her, thereby evincing the sort of resistance that Yancy describes when he writes of the capacity of black subjects to become "more than whites can measure within the horizon of their limited understandings of the Black body" (114).

Following this identity crisis of sorts that Mardou's body spurs in Leo, his visions of Mardou continue to veer into the realm of fantasy, and Leo finds not only his whiteness challenged by her presence, but his masculinity as well. Leo reflects on a prior incident in which his friend Bernard (who Leo acknowledges is "really crazy") accuses Mardou of stealing a pornographic picture from his house, and his doubts about Mardou take him to strange corners of his psyche. He thinks to himself that Bernard's accusation stirs in him "the last deepest final doubt I wanted about Mardou that she was really a thief of some sort and therefore was out to steal my heart, my white man heart, a Negress sneaking in the world sneaking the holy white men for sacrificial rituals later when they'll be roasted and roiled" (48-49). We see here the movement from particular to the stereotype, as he begins by referring to Mardou in particular and to "my heart," then broadens to identify his heart as a "white man heart" and Mardou as a "Negress," and finally places himself in the realm of "holy white men," and Mardou in the context of fears of cannibalism amongst natives encountered upon colonists' arrival in the Americas. However, Kerouac's use of this stereotype in his representation of his narrator

seems to be very self-conscious, as he acknowledges that Bernard's accusation merely confirmed a doubt that he on some deep level "wanted."<sup>vi</sup> As he discovers the falsity of the "doubts" he held about Mardou, "all of them hastily ably assisted by a driving paranoia" (50), Leo returns from his stereotypically-framed descriptions of Mardou to more particularist versions, and confessions of his mistreatment of her. This version of Mardou as individual begins with a literal "vision" of Mardou, significantly described in terms of the gaze:

I want Mardou--because I see her standing, with her black velvet slacks, handsa-  
pockets, thin, slouched, cig hanging from her lips, the smoke itself curling up, her  
little black hairs of short haircut, combed down fine and sleek, her lipstick, pale  
brown skin, dark eyes, the way shadows play on her high cheekbones, the nose,  
the little soft shape of chin to neck, the little Adam's apple, so hip, so cool, so  
beautiful, so modern, so new, so unattainable to sad bagpants me in my shack in  
the middle of the woods. (50)

While Leo certainly idealizes Mardou a bit here, he does not do so in terms of stereotype, instead describing her as an accumulation of small but significant details, and portraying himself as the provincial and Mardou the cosmopolitan. This passage provides a striking contrast to the primitivizing images of blackness as premodern in the text such as the cannibalism reference above, or the moment towards the end of the novella when, in another lapse into stereotype, he tells Mardou that "as part Negro somehow you are the first, the essential woman, and therefore the most, most originally most fully affectionate



and maternal” (94). Rather than fixing Mardou’s blackness in the ancient past, here Leo figures her as “modern” and new.” And further, through her particularity and modernity she becomes “unattainable,” unable to be contained by his white gaze.

As if acknowledging his inability to fully capture Mardou with his “word constructions,” Leo proceeds, after recounting his drunken mistreatment of his lover, to let Mardou tell her own story, in the form of a letter she leaves for him. It is a letter which expresses love but also profound sadness, and which seems to mark the beginning of the end of their relationship. But of course, Mardou is not allowed to entirely tell her side of the story, as Leo punctuates passages from her letter with bits of his own commentary which veers, in quintessential Kerouacian fashion, between broad philosophical musings and insider hipster name- and place-dropping. However, some of the lines from Mardou’s letter to Leo are telling. Omitting Leo’s commentary, Mardou writes, “My image of you is now strange . . . I feel a distance from you which you might feel too which gives me a picture of you that is warm and friendly . . . (and loving) . . . --and because of the anxieties we are experiencing but never speak of really, and are similar too” (58-59). Leo’s commentary on Mardou’s letter is at times condescending, as when he writes of one passage, “I told her often, not enough detail, the details are the life of it” (58), and including “[misspelled]” after Mardou signs off “Your Freind” (61). At other times, it diverges into ahistorical naive fantasy (self-consciously acknowledged in retrospect), as he relates that “at this time my dumb phantasy of the two of us . . . was, a shack in the middle of the Mississippi woods, Mardou with me, damn the lynchers, the not-likings” (60). But Mardou’s vision of Leo, and her voice through the letter also returns Leo to himself, making him conscious perhaps of his whiteness. After Mardou writes of “the

anxieties we are experiencing but never speak of really, and are similar too” (59), Leo writes of this “piece of communication making me suddenly by some majesty of her pen feel sorry for myself, seeing myself like her lost in the suffering ignorant sea of human life” (59). This passage could of course be read as either Leo seeing himself like Mardou, as a black female, or as Leo seeing himself as Mardou sees him. Either reading is provocative, but in keeping with Kerouac’s slow, uncertain, and incomplete movement throughout the text towards a white race consciousness, I tend towards the latter. Leo sees himself, albeit briefly, through Mardou’s black gaze, “lost.”

I do not venture to claim that Kerouac’s narrator achieves any sort of lasting race consciousness by the end of *The Subterraneans*. He continues to fluctuate between describing Mardou as abstraction and individual throughout the text. Here again, however, it seems productive to draw a more distinct line between Leo as narrator and Kerouac as author than many critics have done. Because while Leo may not necessarily undergo a profound change over the course of the text (though I do find that a dawning consciousness of the emptiness of his identity as “white” has profound implications), Mardou as a character does seem to undergo such a change. Her letter to Leo reappears late in the novella, but this time without Leo’s commentary interspersed. As Leo notes just before the introduction of the letter, “it had come to this and this is it” (102). Thus, Mardou’s words, and Mardou’s words alone, serve here to definitively punctuate the ending of their relationship. And her spoken words come back at the very end of the novella to assert her individuality to Leo even more forcefully. At one point, Leo, in one of his flights of primitivism, refers to Mardou as Eve, and she replies directly and forcefully: “Look man, . . . don’t call me Eve” (109).

Mardou's words also effectively end the text, when she tells Leo "Baby it's up to you . . . how many times you want to see me and all that--but I want to be independent like I say" (111). While of course she is using the term "see me" in the colloquial sense, I read this as a moment in which Mardou as independent black individual is rejecting the power of Leo's white gaze, exceeding its capacity to represent her. After Mardou has spoken these words, all Leo has left to say is "And I go home having lost her love. And write this book" (111). Given his earlier confessions of the "constructedness" of his writing, in ending his book with this reiteration of the text's "book inside a book" quality, Kerouac seems to be speaking to his narrator's (and his own) ultimate inability to capture the "essence" of Mardou in his literary gaze, recognizing the limitations of a universalizing "white" perspective as discrete black subjectivities defy containment in discourse and "gaze" back.

### **Baldwin's "Underside of Meaning": Listening to Black Music in *Another Country***

As I have noted, Baldwin too gives the exchange of visual glances between black and white subjects extensive treatment in *Another Country*. However, there seems to be, for Baldwin, a limit to what the gaze can contribute to true understanding between these subjects. In what follows, I will show how Baldwin goes beyond merely recognizing the ontological emptiness of whiteness as identity and the inability for the white gaze to contain black subjectivity, and interrogates the possibilities of music and the aural for recognition beyond the realm of stereotype between white and black characters. This aural recognition is not one in which difference is unproblematically merged, however. Rather, in the space of music and the aural, Baldwin seems to see potential for

communication where difference and individual subjectivity is preserved. And while this recognition may, for Baldwin, be incomplete, he seems to see more potential for communication across difference in the realm of the aural than in the visual.

Because ultimately, while the white gaze makes the black subject often painfully aware of her or his own blackness, and while, as we see in the cases of Vivaldo and Leo Percepied, the return of the black gaze can make white subjects more aware of their whiteness, the question remains open whether Baldwin and Kerouac were suggesting that Vivaldo and Leo's dawning race consciousness does more than merely show white people something about themselves. This question, and the question of whether seeing one's own whiteness (or seeing one's own blackness) opens up more realistic possibilities of understanding and communicating with black subjectivities, is a piece of what occupies Baldwin in *Another Country*.<sup>vii</sup>

I have noted in earlier chapters Nicole Fleetwood's rendering of the visual sphere in black cultural studies as a "punitive field" (13). She finds then that this leads to a "fixation on getting images of blacks 'right' as a way of countering racist stereotypes" (13). In an attempt to evade this right-wrong approach to representations of blackness, Fleetwood instead focuses on black self-representations that disrupt in various ways the dominant racializing gaze. Fleetwood identifies the insertion of "visible seams" ("a discursive intervention to address narrative erasure and to insert a troubling presence in dominant racializing structures"), as a way for black artists to resist narrow portrayals of black identity in visual culture (9).<sup>viii</sup> Baldwin, through his treatment of music and scenes of listening in *Another Country*, creates a sort of aural seam that inserts a troubling presence in his characters' tendencies to rely on stereotype when dealing with characters

of a different race. Baldwin theorizes music as a discursive space rife with potential for intersubjective communication. While the gaze in Baldwin (and in Kerouac) palpates the flesh, much as outlined in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, it does not really penetrate beyond the body. And given the amount of residual stereotype and historical trauma that is invested in the white psyche regarding the black body (and vice versa), Baldwin sees the need, to invoke a cliché, to go beyond skin deep, and he makes a case for the ability of music and an engaged listening practice to potentially achieve this penetration, and a communication, or at least a recognition, that takes as its goal a preservation rather than a dissolution of difference.

Many critics who have discussed Baldwin's treatments of music in his various writings have focused less on the communicative element of music, and more on music as enabling self-reflection.<sup>ix</sup> Critics who have addressed the communicative aspects of music in Baldwin's writing have tended to stress the extra-linguistic communicativity of music.<sup>x</sup> While I don't completely disagree that a piece of what Baldwin values in employing music in his writing has to do with its ability to, as Saadi A. Simawe puts it, "[elude] the control of mind and rationality to appeal directly to passions and emotions" (12-13), I also think that he also values the process of *making meaning* that the listener engages in (a practice requiring thought, discipline, and training). Baldwin also finds this engaged listening practice to have potential in the negotiation of individuals making sense of each other's subjectivities.<sup>xi</sup> While of course musical communication works more obliquely than direct linguistic communication, I don't think that we should write off its capacity to communicate entirely. Musical communication relies much more heavily than linguistic communication on the interpretation of the listener, but in my

assessment, it is exactly this engaged listening practice that music generally and African American music in particular invites that Baldwin attempts to put to use in *Another Country*.<sup>xii</sup>

However, in order to account for why Baldwin turns to music and the act of listening rather than vision and the gaze, we should pause to consider the differences between the aural and the visual, hearing and seeing. While Merleau-Ponty notes the reciprocal nature of vision and its connection to the physical body, the acts of sounding and listening seem perhaps to have more of an active and reciprocal relationship to the mind. French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy writes on the difference between listening and seeing that “The visual persists until its disappearance; the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence” (2). Discussing sound’s “resonance,” he observes that while one may avert one’s gaze or deny recognition to an other, “To be listening is to be at the same time outside and inside, to be open from without and from within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other” (14). Sound, then, for Nancy, acts as a kind of bridge between mind and body, self and other. Roland Barthes provides a similar account of the way that listening connects one to others through active engagement in the process of decoding and making meaning. Barthes writes that while “Hearing is a physiological phenomenon . . . listening is a psychological act” (245). Barthes identifies the modern listener with the psychoanalyst in that the listener actively analyzes and reconstructs what he or she hears, “decoding what is obscure, blurred, or mute, in order to make available to consciousness the ‘underside’ of meaning” (249).

It is this “underside” of meaning that Baldwin uses music to access in *Another Country*. Many, including Josh Kun, have written of Baldwin’s concern with “things

unsaid,” and particularly when it comes to communication across racial boundaries, Baldwin seems to especially value music’s ability to “say” things that otherwise cannot be said. In the context of Vivaldo’s relationship with Ida, Baldwin uses music to simultaneously blur and explicate the racial barriers that stand between the white man and black woman. Immediately following the aforementioned scene in which Vivaldo and Ida make love and Vivaldo veers between viewing Ida as individual and stereotype, Baldwin depicts Ida in the kitchen, cooking for Vivaldo, and singing the lyrics, “If you can’t give me a dollar, / Give me a lousy dime-- / Just want to feed / This hungry man of mine” (179). These lyrics are to the song “Mamie’s Blues,” most famously recorded by Jelly Roll Morton. In Morton’s version of the song, he announces that he is in fact recreating an old blues song called “2:19” sung by Mamie Desdumes, a New Orleans blues singer of the late 19th century. Thus, Baldwin gives us a black woman singing a song famously recorded by a mixed-race man (with a complicated relationship to his own racial identity) covering an unrecorded (presumably) black female progenitor of the blues as she cooks for her white man. If nothing else, a reader familiar with the song (or one who makes him or herself familiar with the song) can see or hear that Baldwin is expressing through his inclusion of the song the indeterminacy of racial identity, and the ways that it is built in part in meta- fashion by way of layer upon layer of mass-mediated condensation of stereotype.

This use of music by Baldwin in *Another Country* to comment on racial identity and the difficulty of true interpersonal communication (especially interracial communication) is not an isolated incident. For instance, there is an earlier moment in which Rufus, feeling trapped by his own body, thinks “His body was controlled by laws

he did not understand. Nor did he understand what force within his body had driven him into such a desolate place” (54). Baldwin follows this moment by writing, “The most impenetrable of mysteries moved in this darkness for less than a second, hinting of reconciliation. And still the music continued, Bessie was saying that she wouldn’t mind being in jail but she had to stay there so long” (54). The reference to Bessie Smith’s “Jailhouse Blues” not only underlines the metaphor of Rufus’s body as prison, but the music itself may also be the “hint of reconciliation” to which Baldwin refers. The closing lines of “Jailhouse Blues” are, “Good morning blues, blues how do you do? / Well, I just come here to have a few words with you,” and for Baldwin, this idea of music as existing in a sort of potentially dialogical space, in which the singer can “have a few words” with the blues, seems to offer the novel’s most promise for at least the beginnings of interpersonal and interracial communication.

We see this again in the relationship between Ida and Vivaldo. At one point, as he feels Ida slipping away from him (she is having an affair with Ellis, who is helping to manage her singing career), Vivaldo thinks to himself:

Perhaps the answer was in the songs . . . What in the world did these songs mean to her? For he knew that she often sang them in order to flaunt before him privacies which he could never hope to penetrate and to convey accusations which he could never hope to decipher, much less deny. And yet, if he could enter this secret place, he would, by that act, be released forever from the power of her accusations. (313)



Eventually, Vivaldo does finally find some measure of understanding by listening to Ida herself, not just her songs. She tells him honestly of the affair and her motivations for it, and he reflects:

He stared into his cup, noting that black coffee was not black, but deep brown. Not many things in the world were really black, not even the night, not even the mines. And the light was not white, either, even the palest light held within itself some hint of its origins, in fire. He thought to himself that he had at last got what he wanted, the truth out of Ida; and he did not know how he was going to live with it. (430)

As he struggles with his dawning awareness of the mutability of racial identity, and to determine how he can live with the “truth” of Ida, Baldwin closes his look at the relationship between Ida and Vivaldo as Ida puts on a record by Mahalia Jackson, “In The Upper Room.” This song, which describes the liberation to be found in confession to Jesus, resonates with the conclusion of Baldwin’s novel. In some versions of the song, the lyrics state of being in the upper room, “in there I feel real.” However, in different versions of the song, and in Mahalia Jackson’s most famous recorded versions, the line is instead “in there I feel the spirit.” Perhaps Baldwin is making a knowing comment on the ambiguity of “real” identity, but in the novel’s conclusion, he seems to be hinting that Vivaldo has at least begun to listen to and hear the “spirit” of Ida’s reality. Even so, to say that Ida is “In The Upper Room” also obviously implies a separation between Vivaldo and Ida. Additionally, the fact that this song is played in the form of a

phonograph record places an extra layer of mediation between the two characters as they try to communicate. This is fitting, for Baldwin's vision of interracial communication is never one in which difference is dissolved; it is, as Taylor puts it, a "reconciliation without guarantees," if it is to be a reconciliation at all. And further, as Bromell points out, it is this lack of guarantees, this acknowledgment of the necessity to "accept and respect precisely what we cannot ever know" about others in order to effect true interracial recognition, that Baldwin wants his reader to understand (68). So while Baldwin leaves the situation between Ida and Vivaldo unresolved, it seems that at the very least, Vivaldo has been forced, like Kerouac's Leo, to reconcile himself with the fact that Ida's subjectivity exceeds the containment of his gaze, and that the process of learning to "live" with her truth may be one of listening.

Lordi writes that "Ida disabuses Vivaldo of the juvenile fantasies of race, and thus of life, that Baldwin accuses Kerouac and Mailer of harboring" (114). But she rightly points out that ultimately, in the context of Baldwin's novel, this recognition works in the service of Vivaldo's artistic creation, the completion of the novel that he had been working on. Thus, she notes some element of regressive gender politics in Baldwin's earlier work, including *Another Country*, whereby he uses black female singers, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday in particular, "not as artists but as tragic, natural muses whose work he must translate to the general public and mediate through the 'high art' forms of his own fiction and essays" (100). Lordi reads Baldwin's gender politics in relation to black female singers as progressively developing, to the point where he strives for an "accompaniment" approach to incorporating their artistry into his writing.

This point, that in some of Baldwin's work (and we can certainly read this into Kerouac as well), there is a tendency to depict black female musicians in such a way that "the telos of black female singers' testimonies to suffering is a male artist's creative breakthrough," is an important one (104), and one that also might be applied to the largely male-oriented focus of this dissertation up to this point. Taking this point, then, and in this spirit of "accompaniment," I will again move forward in historical time in what follows to examine some of the most compelling artistry that I would describe as meta-black, being done by black female artists in the traditionally hypermasculine realm of hip hop music and culture. Focusing explicitly on the artistry of Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, I will look at how these contemporary artists are making use in meta- fashion of intersectional iconographies of blackness and womanhood that circulate in the popular imaginary to carve out a space for a meta-black femininity in hip hop and mass popular culture.

### Notes

<sup>i</sup> For example, Jon Panish, in *The Color of Jazz: Race and Representation in Postwar American Culture*, finds that in Kerouac's representations of black jazz musicians, these musicians function less as fully fleshed-out characters and more as symbols of a primitivist spiritual essence that the author ultimately uses to consolidate and cosign his own identity as enigmatic literary outsider. Panish writes of Kerouac's representations of Charlie Parker in *The Subterraneans*, for instance, that "the version of Parker that appears in the work of Jack Kerouac is a white fantasy of a black self" (57).

<sup>ii</sup> Taylor explains: "In their mania for a de-ethnicized, classless, hyperrational whiteness, white men began to feel as if they had cut themselves off from the pursuit and satisfaction of desires that lay outside of the utilitarian goals of family and nation [...] Thus, while black men were generally rendered other and abject because of their association with sex and the body, for certain beatnik bohemians they now became objects of desire" (73). I should note, however, that I do not find Kerouac or his characters to be seeking out a "de-ethnicized" whiteness. References to Kerouac's own French-Canadian ethnic identity abound in his writings, including in *The Subterraneans*, as I will show. Further, the recurring character of Dean Moriarty/Cody (based on Neal Cassady) embodies in many ways the characteristics that Taylor claims these white authors project upon black men. Kerouac portrays this character as a sort of hero, and he is white.

<sup>iii</sup> Taylor reads Baldwin's novel *Another Country* as a "counter-text" to Mailer, and perhaps, by extension, to Kerouac (92). In doing so, he focuses on Baldwin's treatment of jazz music in his novel, and finds that "Baldwin shows how Jazz cannot simply be understood as 'the music of orgasm,' as Mailer would have it, but as with the lack that motivates the hipster's desire for blackness, Jazz is about loss, and a desire for recognition" (92).

<sup>iv</sup> Panish goes on to claim that "Kerouac uses this rhetorical strategy, finally, not to say something about Parker or jazz musicians overall but to enhance his own image as a kind, humane but suffering, victimized artist and man by connecting himself to the already established image of the exploited jazz musician" (59).

<sup>v</sup> These are feelings about San Francisco that Kerouac shared. Kerouac (and Allen Ginsburg and several other Beat writers from the East Coast) had difficult relationships with leading figures in the West Coast Beat literary scene, particularly Kenneth Rexroth, who did not like Kerouac. In a 1958 interview, Rexroth dismissed Kerouac, saying, "As far as I'm concerned, Kerouac is what Madison Avenue wants a rebel to be. That isn't my kind of rebel" (<http://jacketmagazine.com/23/rex-rothbg-antin-iv.html>).

<sup>vi</sup> Once again, Kerouac directly links his fantasies surrounding Mardou to the world of literary fiction, as his thoughts turn to cannibalism and he is reminded of "the Tennessee Williams story about the Negro Turkish bath attendant and the little white fag" (49). This is a reference to the Tennessee Williams short story, "Desire and the Black Masseuse," in which a gay white man is beaten to death and then literally eaten by a black masseuse who he has paid for a bath and massage. Williams' story blurs the lines between fantasy and reality and sexuality and violence, and Kerouac inserts Leo's projections of Mardou into this complex economy, with "Mardou becoming the big buck nigger Turkish bath attendant, and I the little fag who's broken to bits in the love affair and carried to the bay in a burlap bag, there to be distributed piece by piece and broken bone by bone to the fish [...] so she'd thief my soul and eat it" (49). By mediating Leo's fantasies of Mardou through this literary reference, he seems to be acknowledging its status as fantasy. But of course, the anxiety that this fantasy stirs in him about his white masculinity is real.

<sup>vii</sup> These same questions can and have recently been asked about the academic sub- (or inter-) discipline of whiteness studies. Because while Richard Dyer's call to "see whiteness, see its power, its particularity and limitedness, put it in its place and end its rule" (4) is an admirable sentiment and represents an important intervention in cultural and ethnic studies, such a focus on the white gaze may limit and underestimate the agency afforded the black (and otherwise "othered") subjects fixed in this gaze.

<sup>viii</sup> Fleetwood also outlines two other primary ways that the white gaze can be disrupted: through strategic deployments of non-iconicity ("a movement away from the singularity and significance placed on instantiations of blackness to resolve that which cannot be resolved") (9), and excess flesh ("a strategic enactment of certain black female artists and entertainers to deploy hypervisibility as constitutive of black femaleness in dominant visual culture") (9).

<sup>ix</sup> For instance, in an essay that attempts to comprehensively cover the role of music in Baldwin's fiction, D. Quentin Miller explains that "Part of Baldwin's quest was to use music, especially the blues, as a key to unlock the mysteries of his identity as an exile, an

artist, a black American in a racially hostile era, and a boy preacher who turned against his church” (84). Thus, for Miller, music in Baldwin’s fiction is largely a means of revealing one’s self to oneself.

<sup>x</sup> Saadi A. Simawe, for instance, specifically discussing Baldwin’s play *The Amen Corner*, writes that “Baldwin’s well-known experimentation with bluesification or jazzification of fiction and style [...] may be understood as genuine and ingenious attempts at liberating the soul from what he views as one of the ideological grids, the prison-house of language” (15).

<sup>xi</sup> Lordi makes a convincing case that a listening practice was what Baldwin had in mind in his uses of black music in his writing: “The collective function of these [Baldwin’s] writings is not to frame music as a superior medium that expresses what language cannot but to use literary language to shape how music might be heard” (136).

<sup>xii</sup> Additionally, Josh Kun discusses Baldwin’s relationship to Bessie Smith and the blues, specifically discussing two essays, “A Stranger in the Village” and “The Discovery of What it Means to Be an American,” written while Baldwin was in a remote Swiss village working on his first novel. Kun finds that “For Baldwin, listening to and identifying with music [...] was a way of confronting, voicing, and grappling with his sexual and racial identities: namely, the identificatory crossings of his queerness and his blackness” (309). To support this, Kun draws on Theodor Adorno’s essay “The Curves of the Needle,” when Adorno writes of the phonograph as a “mirroring device, wherein the listener hears a split self, split “between the self that is heard and the self that is hearing” (qtd. in Kun 311). Kun thus finds that listening to Bessie Smith helps Baldwin to confront in himself “the summation of all the stereotypes, all the prejudices, all the projected racial and sexual fantasies, all the watermelons and pickaninnies and dialect speech, and all the externally imposed self-hate” (312). This description of how the act of listening causes Baldwin to reflect upon his own identity and results in a sort of “split self” is not dissimilar to Du Bois’s double consciousness, only instead of seeing oneself through the eyes of others, Baldwin is hearing himself through the ears of others.

## CHAPTER 4

### PINK LEMONADE: BEYONCÉ, NICKI MINAJ, AND A META-BLACK HIP HOP FEMINIST AESTHETIC

#### Introduction: Hip Hop in a Crooked Room

In her aforementioned readings of *Another Country*, Emily Lordi makes the important point that in some of Baldwin's early work, there is a tendency to foreground male characters' achievements and to portray black female characters (singers in particular) as primarily enabling this achievement. We can read a similar tendency--and more of it than in Baldwin, really--in Kerouac, and into Du Bois, Johnson, and Ellison as well. I also acknowledge that this insight might be applied to the largely male-oriented focus of my first three chapters. Taking this point, then, and in the spirit of "accompaniment" which Lordi finds to characterize Baldwin's progression in his gender politics in later writing on black female singers, I jump ahead in time in what follows to examine some of the most compelling artistry that I would describe as meta-black, being performed by black female artists in the traditionally hypermasculine realm of hip hop music and culture. Focusing explicitly on the artistry of Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, I will look at how these contemporary musicians are making use in meta- fashion of intersectional iconographies of blackness and womanhood that circulate in the popular imaginary to carve out a space for a meta-black female identity in hip hop and mass popular culture.<sup>i</sup>

Discussing the ways that African American women must negotiate the stereotypes of black femininity circulating in the culture around them, Melissa Harris-Perry uses the novel metaphor, drawn from behavioral studies, of trying to stand in a crooked room:

"When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked

room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion” (29). Through her interviews with focus groups of black women in her 2011 book *Sister Citizen*, Harris-Perry focuses on three primary stereotypes of black womanhood that help to shape the crooked room that African American women inhabit: the mammy (sexless black woman who caters exclusively to white needs), the jezebel (hypersexualized black woman), and the sapphire (angry black woman) (33). She goes on to use “shame” as a lens through which to view the effects that these stereotypes have on black female subjectivity, and examines the various ways that black women respond to this shaming. Some, she claims, undergo a “racial distancing,” wherein they attempt to distance themselves from blackness as identity and the stereotypes that come with it (120). Some retreat into the race, remaining silent, and others turn their shame outward, responding in “humiliated fury” (122, 123). Like many black feminist theorists before her, Harris-Perry also observes the formation of a counter-stereotype of black femininity, the “strong black woman,” as a response to this shaming: “To protect against this shaming assault of race and gender stereotypes, many sisters retreat behind a sense of mythic strength, creating a collective self-image of imperviousness” (179). As with many “positive” stereotypes, however, she points out the downsides of the mythology of the strong black woman: “When black women are expected to be super-strong, they cannot be simply human” (185).

Harris-Perry’s work in *Sister Citizen* is important, in that it takes seriously as political the internal psychological and emotional responses of black women to the social world that they inhabit, and the strategies they invoke in order to gain recognition in the

public sphere. The issue of agency in navigating these stereotypes of black femininity is one that Harris-Perry struggles with, as do many black women. One mode of agency that Harris-Perry explores is cultural, though the texts she examines are primarily literary. She cites Zora Neale Hurston's Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a black woman who learns to grapple with the world's expectations of her in a way that ultimately leads to her self-fulfillment. She also discusses the importance of Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* as a seminal text for contemporary black women seeking recognition. *for colored girls*, she argues, allows black women to recognize that they are not struggling alone. Harris-Perry writes that for many, reading or seeing the play "is like noticing not that one is alone in the crooked room but, rather, that there are others standing bent, stooped or surprisingly straight. It is an experience of having someone make visible the slanted images that too frequently remain invisible" (31).

Harris-Perry is more dismissive, however, of the gender politics of perhaps the most pervasive contemporary iteration of African American popular culture, hip hop. After mentioning the many black women who she sees as "bend[ing] themselves to fit the distortion" of the crooked room, she cites this as an explanation as to why a black woman would appear half-naked in a hip hop video (29). Later, she discusses the promise for women's voices that she saw in hip hop artists of the 1980s and 90s including MC Lyte, Salt N Pepa, and Queen Latifah, lamenting that while "early hip-hop seemed to hold the promise of a modern blues aesthetic--one that would respond to black women speaking about their own complicated realities of sexual desire, action, autonomy, coercion, ecstasy, and abuse . . . as hip-hop aged, the space for black women's voices narrowed"



(65). She cites artists such as Foxy Brown, Lil' Kim, and Nicki Minaj as examples of this and finds that in the contemporary moment, "Instead of offering a forum for sisters to voice their own truths, hip-hop made black women into silent, scantily clad figures who writhe willingly behind male artists" (65). The ultimate problem that Harris-Perry sees in this is not necessarily the artists themselves, but in how their representations of black femininity generate "moral panics," rather than creating structural change: "Instead of changing structures, too many solutions in the public sphere involve enforced limitations on black women's sexuality" (67).

Anxiety over the way that women are represented in hip hop is, of course, nothing new, nor is claiming that the popular culture of one's own generation is superior and more progressive than that of the current generation. This anxiety is at the center of so-called hip-hop feminism, a contemporary offshoot of black feminism. Articulated in the late 1990s and early 2000s by writers such as Joan Morgan and Gwendolyn Pough (Morgan coined the term in her 1999 book *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down*), hip hop feminism, as Whitney Peoples aptly sums it up, is "a means of reconciliation and reclamation on the part of young black women in the U.S. trying to create a space for themselves between the whiteness and/or academically sanitized versions of university-based feminism . . . and the maleness of the hip-hop culture that most grew up on" (26). Hip hop feminism grows out of this tension between a desire to espouse the empowering and uplifting ideals of second-wave feminism and the possibilities for self-expression (including racial self-expression) and political mobilization that they see in hip hop culture, warts and all.<sup>ii</sup> Peoples does a

particularly good job of summarizing the contradictions inherent in hip hop feminism, writing that these thinkers:

offer that beyond the problematic of demeaning women via its incontestable misogyny, hip-hop provides a space for young black women to express their race and ethnic identities and to critique racism. Moreover, hip-hop feminists contend that hip-hop is also a site where young black women begin to build or further develop their own gender critique and feminist identity, which they can then turn toward the misogyny of rap music (24).

But like Harris-Perry, hip hop feminists often tend to find the hip hop artists who they see as offering the most cogent gender critiques in an idealized near-past, and many seem to identify contemporary artists (and, in particular, more commercially successful artists) as regressive in their message. For example, in a 2006 interview Morgan cites Queen Latifah as an artist who “I love, I love, I love,” while acknowledging that “her ability to express herself in the fullness of her artistry really came when she stopped rapping” (771). But when asked about Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown, two artists who were very relevant to the hip hop scene in the late 1990s to early 2000s and who were known for their flagrant displays of sexuality, Morgan uses a graphic analogy in arguing that the success of an artist like Lil’ Kim does not help the cause of feminism or even other female rappers:

If I'm working at a corporation and my boss is really into me and he makes it clear that I can pretty much get this promotion, but I have to give him a blow job and I give him blow job and I get the promotion and my shit is tight, I've elevated my game, but all I've done for the women coming after me is guaranteed that if they have to go through this boss to get this promotion, they are going to have to give the blow job. So, it really is as simple as that when we talk about bringing it down to common sense. There is a difference between empowering your game and elevating your own game as a woman and making moves that allow other women to make choices and be able to rise on their own terms. I don't think artists like Kim and Foxy ever did that. They don't challenge hip-hop, they basically conformed to the image of women that is already put out there by men. (771)

The contemporary hip hop scene, of course, provides ample material to bemoan, and Morgan is not alone in criticizing popular artists like Lil' Kim for their lack of a structural critique of the music industry's patriarchal capitalism. Heather Duerre Humann, for example, in the 2007 hip hop feminism anthology, *Homegirls Make Some Noise*, argues of Lil' Kim's work and the output of Beyoncé's early career with the R&B group Destiny's Child, "Their songs frequently encourage women to defy traditional gender roles and fight exploitation as *individuals*, but they do not speak out against an inherently exploitative political and economic *system*" (99). Diane Railton, in analyzing Beyoncé's 2004 music video for the song "Baby Boy," finds that the video reinscribes "black female sexuality as first and foremost hypersexuality -- primitive, feral, uncontrolled, and uncontrollable. Moreover, its very uncontrollability reinscribes the

black female body as available, literally to the look of the spectator and symbolically to the desires and fantasies of both white and black men” (99). This sort of criticism has even bled into an earlier generation of black feminists’ response to Beyoncé’s largely-acclaimed 2016 *Lemonade* visual album, which I will discuss extensively in this chapter. bell hooks, for example, praises the album for its “multidimensional images of black female life,” but ultimately finds its feminism to be a “fantasy feminism” wherein “there are no class, sex, and race hierarchies that breakdown simplified categories of women and men, no call to challenge and change systems of domination, no emphasis on intersectionality.”

These sorts of criticisms of popular culture’s lack of didactic political content and its ineffectiveness at spurring structural change are nothing new, of course. Frederic Jameson perhaps most famously critiques the way that the co-opting of cultural and aesthetic innovation is structurally embedded in late capitalism: “its [postmodernism’s] own offensive features--from obscurity and sexually explicit material to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance . . . no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official culture of Western society” (56). David M. Jones has recently applied this criticism of postmodern popular culture to hip hop and cultural critics who lionize hip hop directly, noting among these critics “a temptation to revere the ‘novel-seeming goods’ of hip hop rather than to recognize the negative effects of corporate control and failures of the aesthetic imagination to move past familiar and crude stereotypes of African Americans” (77). If one begins from a fundamentally anti-capitalist frame of

reference, it is difficult to refute these arguments. Even some of the most “progressive” hip hop artists are firmly intertwined with the circuits of global capitalism (take, as but one example, “conscious” rapper Common’s work in advertising campaigns with Coca-Cola and Microsoft). And though opinions might vary on the progressiveness of his artistic output, Jay-Z, probably the most prominent figure in contemporary hip hop, simultaneously invokes black political radicalism even as he celebrates capitalist excess. On the song “Murder to Excellence,” off of his 2011 collaborative album with Kanye West, *Watch the Throne*, Jay-Z proclaims, “I arrived on the day Fred Hampton died,” and then, later in the same song, associates his vision of 21<sup>st</sup> century “black excellence” primarily with “black tie, black Maybachs” and “opulence [and] decadence.” Listening to the song, one can’t help but wonder what an activist like Hampton might make of this supposed legacy, and where the hope for any sort of collective project lies in the rapper’s vision of black power as conspicuous individual consumption.

And yet, rather than either lamenting the sort of vision of black (economic) power espoused by rappers like Jay-Z and West as a “sell out” of collective ideals or uncritically celebrating it as an act of resistance to the hegemonic “system,” we would be better served by examining viewing it as simultaneously both and neither of these things. In fact, such paradoxes have been characteristic of hip hop (and the postmodern moment) from its beginnings. As Tricia Rose points out, “Hip hop has always been articulated via commodities and engaged in the revision of meanings attached to them” (41). Thus, we should not view hip hop’s mass culture manifestations as a challenge to the postmodern power structure at all in the binary sense of the term.<sup>iii</sup> As S. Craig Watkins notes in his book *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*, the study of

popular media tends to frame its subject in terms of the dialectic between hegemonic containment and resistance. And yet, as Watkins observes, “popular media culture is remarkably more complex than the containment/resistance binary opposition implies” (51).

And black identity specifically has also often pivoted on a similar sort of containment/resistance dichotomy. As Hua Hsu observes in an excellent essay on the notion of “selling out” in relation to African American identity in the age of Obama, “the discourse around selling out assumed a kind of purity in remaining marginal, as though something vital would be lost in that transition from periphery to core. It was a way of insuring that people were true not just to themselves but to an abstract belief in the bonds of community as well.” Hsu ultimately finds that a critical piece of the response by contemporary artists like Paul Beatty, Kendrick Lamar and others to the contradictions posed by the resistance/containment dichotomy of “selling out” is “to opt out altogether--to reckon with that contradiction rather than pretend we can resolve it.” This notion of inhabiting the contradictions inherent in individual and collective black identities is at the heart of the meta-black aesthetic as I articulate it, and as it manifests in hip hop music and culture in particular.

Thus, to criticize popular hip hop music because it lacks a structural critique of capitalism is unfair, as is writing off its potential for socio-political critique based on its lack of explicit, didactic motivation, especially if it is compared unfavorably to other forms of popular culture. Because, as Richard Iton eloquently points out regarding the differences between political and cultural discourses, especially in the African American tradition, “The inclination in formal politics toward the quantifiable and the bordered, the

structured, ordered, policeable, and disciplined is in fundamental tension with popular culture's willingness to embrace disturbance, to engage the apparently mad and maddening" (11). Music's effects rely in large part on affect, and these affective qualities, as Michael P. Jeffries points out in regards to the seeming cognitive dissonance that accompanies a so-called "hip hop feminist" enjoying a hip hop song with misogynistic lyrics: "Musical experience, including the seemingly passive act of listening, is distinctly performative. Music structures our experiences, becoming part of our emotions and memories of places, events, and people in some instances, and serving as a tool of self-regulation and emotional technology in others" (278). It is this affective capacity of music, and popular culture more generally, that allows Iton to consider that "it could be argued that the development of broader solidaristic sensibilities, which are crucial to sustaining a progressive politics in an era of neoliberal individuation, is *best* accomplished by means of the actions of creative artists" (19). Whether one agrees with Iton's claim or not, the point holds that popular culture most certainly has a profound impact on how we see ourselves and articulate our individual subjectivities and collective affiliations.

It is certainly difficult to make a claim for the "progressiveness" of the content of some of the output of contemporary hip hop artists. I would point out, though, that notwithstanding the championing by critics like Harris-Perry and Morgan of the more progressive artists of their generation, these negative representations of women in hip hop have always been present. For example, in January of 1994, Salt N Pepa's *Very Necessary* and Queen Latifah's *Black Reign*, artists whom Harris-Perry cites as representative of a more progressive era for women in hip hop, shared the Billboard

R&B/Hip Hop Album Charts with albums such as Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggystyle* (including tracks like "Gz Up Hoes Down") and Too \$hort's *Get In Where You Fit In* (featuring the track "Blowjob Betty").

Many of the hip hop feminists seem to agree with Harris-Perry's assertion that "the space for black women's voices [has] narrowed" since the 1990s (65). While this may have been true in the first decade of the twenty-first century, it seems to me that it is no longer the case. Brittney Cooper has recently seemed to concur with Harris-Perry on this count, noting that "by 2005, the Grammy Awards had eliminated the award for best female artist, due to the paucity of nominees" (55). Cooper locates a hip hop-inflected strain persisting in literature written by black women. However, the second decade of the twenty-first century has seen something of a resurgence of women in hip hop. For instance, hip hop and hip hop-inflected artists like Nicki Minaj, Azealia Banks, Iggy Azalea, Angel Haze, Dej Loaf, Janelle Monae, and Beyoncé, to name a few, have all experienced varying degrees of mainstream success in recent years. And many of these artists' meta- significations on stereotypes of gender, blackness, and the history of women in hip hop is a significant piece of what has allowed them to carve out a renewed space for women in hip hop. In what follows, I will look at perhaps the two biggest female hip hop stars of the moment, Minaj and Beyoncé.<sup>iv</sup>

Minaj's meta-black play with gender, blackness, and her role as a female rapper, as problematic as it is, is much more complicated and self-aware than some, including Harris-Perry, might have it. Where Harris-Perry lumps Minaj in with Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, for example, I see Minaj signifying on and even partly satirizing these artists and the history of the Jezebel stereotype as it has circulated in American popular culture in



meta- fashion to carve out space for a nuanced black female identity. Even Beyoncé, an artist who is generally viewed as being more progressive politically than Minaj, has, as I have observed, received her share of criticism for regressive gender politics. We should be careful about responding to that criticism by overemphasizing the “resistance” of her (or of any popular cultural artist’s) aesthetic. However, in her recent emergence as a “political” artist and her turn to visual albums (which also incorporate poetry) such as 2016’s *Lemonade*, I will demonstrate that her play with and against these stereotypes of blackness generally, and black femininity specifically, represent attempts to articulate a nuanced, black, and feminist humanity underneath the larger-than-life mask. A key piece of this meta-black feminist aesthetic in *Lemonade* comes, as I will show, in Beyoncé’s sustained meta-awareness of her relationship to her audience, and her relationship to both material histories of blackness and black womanhood, and the representations of these histories as they circulate in the popular imaginary. Thus, rather than focusing on finding explicit “resistance” in her aesthetic, I will instead be looking at the way her meta-blackness reflects and models how black femininity is *lived* in the contemporary moment.

### **“Why Can’t You See Me?”: Beyoncé’s Meta-Black Feminism**

Those familiar with Beyoncé’s early career as a member of the girl group Destiny’s Child and her early solo work may have been surprised at the emergence, starting with 2013’s self-titled visual album, of the singer as an audio-visual artist tackling serious themes of race and feminism, sampling Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED talk entitled “We Should All Be Feminists” on the track “Flawless.” However, as Daphne Brooks has observed, Beyoncé’s transition from bubble

gum pop to a more political, black feminist aesthetic was already well underway before 2013. Writing about Beyoncé's 2006 album, *B-Day*, Brooks makes the claim that "her newer material marks her arrival as an artist unafraid of complicating and disturbing her well-regarded cultural persona in less conventional ways than the strait-jacketed patriarchal models afforded most contemporary pop divas" (184). Even so, the *Beyoncé* album seems to have marked a distinct turn in the artist's career. Recorded largely in secrecy, and released as a surprise on December 13, 2013, it was almost universally critically acclaimed and was nominated for five Grammys, winning three.

Perhaps emboldened by the success of the album, more challenging in its format and content than her previous material, Beyoncé executed another surprise-release video, for her song "Formation," on February 6, 2016. The video draws heavily on southern and New Orleans culture, including shots of Beyoncé atop a New Orleans police car being submerged in rising waters, and also inserts itself into contemporary conversations around race and police brutality. One shot in the video features a young black boy in a black hoodie dancing in front of a line of police in full riot gear. This shot is interspersed with an image of graffiti on a wall reading "stop shooting us," clearly referencing the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri and across the country surrounding the killing of Michael Brown and other incidences of police violence towards African Americans. The "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" mantra invoked by protestors is inverted when, after the young boy's dance, the police officers raise their hands in the air.

In addition to these references to contemporary issues of police brutality, the video also makes direct allusions to the African American slave past, featuring scenes of Beyoncé and other black women dressed in clothing evocative of 19<sup>th</sup> century southern

gentility in and around a southern plantation house.<sup>v</sup> And the lyrics to “Formation” make more direct and forceful claims to blackness than audiences may have been accustomed to from Beyoncé, with lyrics such as “I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros / I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils.” Lyrics like these are also filtered through the lens of stereotype (“negro nose”), and of stereotype as it circulates in popular culture. Beyoncé doubled down on this embrace of blackness in her performance of the song at halftime of the 2016 Super Bowl, performing with backup dancers dressed in modified Black Panther attire. On one of the biggest stages in contemporary American popular culture, Beyoncé brought issues of race and police brutality to the fore by referencing the iconography of a previous generation of black radicalism. This invocation of the Black Panthers was also provocative in terms of gender, as the all-female dancers in Black Panther garb invert the perceived sexism of black militancy in the 1960s and 70s that Michele Wallace observes in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*.<sup>vi</sup> And, insofar as “Formation” can be said to be connected to the #BlackLivesMatter movement (at the very least, she signifies upon it in meta-black fashion), perhaps the dress of the dancers also points to the critical role that black women have had in founding and sustaining this contemporary movement.

Beyoncé’s newfound willingness to embrace and provoke discussions of race in America led, perhaps unsurprisingly, to something like the “moral panic” that Harris-Perry observes growing out of hip hop’s exaggerated representations of black female sexuality. Various police groups, politicians, and news outlets engaged in moralizing discussions over the displays of black militancy and what they saw as a disparagement of police in the video and Super Bowl performance. The New Jersey State Troopers

Fraternal Association, for example, wrote a letter to NFL commissioner Roger Goodell that called the performance “blatantly anti-police,” and took offense to the use of Black Panther iconography, reading in part, “I should remind you, the NFL and Team Owners that NJ State Trooper Werner Foerster was brutally murdered by Black Panther member and convicted fugitive Joanne Chesimard in 1973 on the NJ Turnpike.” Politicians such as Rudy Giuliani and New York State Representative Peter King also weighed in, with King decrying the performance as “one more example of how acceptable it has become to be anti-police.” Even among those not as loudly voicing their outrage, there was a sense among some that Beyoncé’s foray into black politics comprised a betrayal of sorts, a sentiment that *Saturday Night Live* poked fun at with a sketch entitled “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black,” featuring various white people losing their minds upon discovering that Beyoncé is, in fact, black.

The “backlash” to the “Formation” video and performance is, of course, nothing new for black popular entertainers who choose to insert themselves into issues of racial politics. Nina Simone experienced similar backlash as she became more outspoken on issues related to the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1960s, and the argument can be made that her career, and perhaps her mental health, took a turn for the worse as a result. Lauryn Hill’s career followed a similar trajectory. These examples, and Beyoncé’s, demonstrate the delicate balance that the myth of the black superwoman pointed out by Harris-Perry imposes on black female entertainers, whose personas are, in many ways, actually super-, or larger than life. The positive stereotype of the strong black woman bears the burden of her race (she is a “Survivor,” as Beyoncé put it earlier in her career with Destiny’s Child), but she does so quietly, stoically, and certainly not angrily, lest she

be labeled with the Sapphire stereotype. While Hill and Simone both had their individual struggles with mental illness, it is disturbing to see how easily their political statements are made, in a media context, to conform to the stereotype of “angry (crazy) black woman.”

So perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Beyoncé directly invokes Simone on the visual album *Lemonade* (also surprise released on April 23, 2016). The song “Sandcastles” begins with a shot of the cover of Simone’s 1967 *Silk & Soul* and the ending of Simone’s version of Burt Bacharach’s “The Look of Love,” and the camera subsequently pans to Beyoncé playing the piano and recording herself performing the song at home. The self-conscious, meta-, and techno-performative layers are evident immediately: she begins with the mediated, commercially reproduced icon of Simone, and then transitions to herself recording her own performance; the video is a recording of a recording of a recording, and so on. The layers of mediation and meta- invocation of a black musical icon recall Ellison’s stereophonic use of Louis Armstrong in *Invisible Man*.

The response, online and in the media, to the release of *Lemonade*, was tremendous. It seemed that every media outlet was in a mad race to get their thinkpiece on the album out before the competition. The album also spurred a great deal of celebrity gossip. The album’s songs center around the theme of infidelity, and speculation began immediately as to whether Beyoncé was referring to real-life infidelities by her husband, rapper Jay-Z, or her father’s unfaithfulness to her mother, which she also references on the album’s songs. In response to these rumors, members of the so-called “Beyhive,” an online community of Beyoncé fans, bombarded the Twitter and Instagram feeds of Rachel Roy, a fashion designer rumored to be the other woman in Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s

love triangle, who Beyoncé disparagingly refers to on the album as “Becky with the good hair.”

Critical reaction to *Lemonade* was overwhelmingly laudatory, and behind all of the gossip, critics were consistent in zeroing in on Beyoncé’s commentaries on race and gender in the album. For instance, in a *Vulture* roundtable, Lindsay Peoples offers, “I think this album is a love letter to black women.” Her fellow panelist Dee Lockett speaks to the burden of representation she sees being borne by Beyoncé, and by black people generally in expressing the triumphs and failures of this love: “I also think it’s a meditation on the way black people love: Our love is always political, it has no choice. When it fails, it’s a failure for all black lovers.” This seems to be particularly true for a figure as public as Beyoncé (a figure for whom so much of her marriage, and her intersecting identities as black and a woman, play out in the public eye). Thus, for many of the black female writers offering up their thoughts on *Lemonade*, a piece of the album’s power comes in Beyoncé’s allowing her audience to glimpse her vulnerability. In a piece for *Jezebel* entitled “Lemonade is Beyoncé’s Body and Blood,” Clover Hope writes:

we know the caretaker, black and powerful, herself needs protecting. This is the reality and fantasy of *Lemonade*: a beautiful blur of truth and fiction, sacred and profane, strength and weakness, shrewdness and art. Inherited burdens and, finally, salvation. It’s the story of, and for, the tossed-aside black women whose fury makes us strike and for those who bottle it up.

In another profile of the album for *The Guardian*, Ijeoma Oluo also focuses on these themes of black love and the tension between strength and vulnerability, writing that “Lemonade is about the love that black women have – the love that threatens to kill us, makes us crazy and makes us stronger than we should ever have to be.” Oluo points to the confining dichotomy that Harris-Perry observes between the “Angry Black Woman” stereotype and the corresponding positive stereotype of the “Strong Black Woman.” Oluo writes, “we are not expected to be angry. A black woman who shows her anger is quickly scorned. ‘Black men have so much to deal with already,’ people say, ‘it is your job to support him and help him become a better man.’” Oluo continues, observing that “from this deep, heartbreaking love is born a strength that we shouldn’t have to have. Generations of work, love and neglect have made quiet warriors of us. Our very existence is a protest.”

It is exactly these tensions between strength and vulnerability, between the “strong” and the “angry” black woman, and between the intimately private and spectacularly public that accounts for much of *Lemonade*’s affective power for its black female audience. These are tensions that black women in America, and not only celebrities like Beyoncé, must navigate in real and virtual spaces every day. Certainly, a pop cultural icon like Beyoncé experiences these tensions on a heightened scale. But *Lemonade* betrays a consciousness on the artist’s part of the way that the black body in America is made a spectacle, and the fact that blackness and black femininity must be lived in relation to the mediated stereotypes embodied and deconstructed by artists like Beyoncé. And further, the album demonstrates Beyoncé’s awareness that she is linked to her black female audience in ways that go beyond the typical artist-fan relationship. I find

that the response to *Lemonade* is due in part to a recognition of this, and of Beyoncé's use of meta-black aesthetic techniques to model a meta-black feminine subjectivity that seems vital and real (particularly in the way it incorporates the real and the simulated, the material and the performed) to her black female audience. In what follows, I will focus in on what I take to be the most powerful and provocative moments of this sort of meta-awareness in the visual album.

*Lemonade*, from its very beginnings, displays a heightened meta-awareness of itself as spectacle. In the first shot where Beyoncé is actually seen (it opens with the iconic cover shot of her in a fur coat and her hair in cornrows, but with her face concealed), the viewer sees a stage with curtain drawn. The camera pans down slowly to reveal Beyoncé, on her knees, lifting her head to reveal herself to the camera. The album's opening song, "Pray You Catch Me," is ostensibly about an unfaithful lover, but the lyrics and the visuals play on larger themes of surveillance and the history of black people in America. Beyoncé's betrayed lover is "Constantly aware of it all, my lonely ear / Pressed against the walls of your world." And in the song's hook, she sings "Pray to catch you whispering / I pray you catch me listening." These lyrics are set to interspersed shots of Beyoncé on stage and walking in a field, wearing all black, her hair covered (with a hoodie, a symbol with significance to the #BLM movement), and with little to no makeup on, not the type of images we are used to seeing of the pop superstar.

The song is also interspersed with shots of black women wearing white dresses in Southern Gothic settings similar to those depicted in the "Formation" video. LaKisha Michelle Simmons gives extensive, specific historical context for the Southern settings of



*Lemonade*, noting for example the haunting history of Destrehan plantation, one of the Louisiana plantations where the visual album was filmed. Simmons writes that in 1811:

At Destrehan, an army of plantation owners and white elites confronted [a] black rebel army. The plantation elites won the battle and captured the men responsible for the uprising. As punishment, and as a reminder to the enslaved to fear white power, they executed those responsible and cut off their heads. The plantation owners placed the severed heads of the revolutionaries on poles and lined them up for 40 miles along the river to New Orleans.

Simmons makes the case that “Dismembered and displaced bodies are haunting the landscape of *Lemonade*’s past and present,” but ultimately finds that the album “works to make space for black women’s lives, love, pain, and madness in a landscape imbued with the enslaved past.”

This “haunting” of the slave past is without a doubt a critical piece of the album’s power, but in addition to serving as meta- cultural references to this painful history, this backdrop and specifically the sartorial choices seem to directly reference Julie Dash’s 1991 film, *Daughters of the Dust*.<sup>vii viii</sup> Set among the Gullah people of the Southeast United States at the beginning of the 20th century, the reference to this film evokes communal black identity (the Gullah were unique in that they lived in relative isolation on Georgia and South Carolina sea islands, and thus preserved a large number of African linguistic, spiritual, and cultural traditions). In addition to this more “retrospective” reference, invoking *Daughters of The Dust* also offers a meta- commentary on the role of

black females as innovative and important cultural creators in the contemporary moment, as Dash's film was groundbreaking in that it was the first feature film directed by an African American woman to receive wide theatrical distribution in the United States. Thus, in addition to connecting to the Southern (and African) past, Beyoncé is also situating her work in the context of innovative black female cultural work in the present.

Invoking one such contemporary black female literary artist, Beyoncé delivers lines by poet Warsan Shire in spoken word form in this segment, saying "You remind me of my father, a magician ... able to exist in two places at once . . . The past and the future merge to meet us here. What luck. What a fucking curse."<sup>ix</sup> Beyoncé further explores this curse, this burden of the black woman to be "strong" for her man, to suffer in silence in the section of the film labeled "Denial," running down a litany of the sacrifices she attempts in order to cope: "I tried to change. Closed my mouth more, tried to be softer, prettier, less awake. Fasted for 60 days, wore white, abstained from mirrors, abstained from sex, slowly did not speak another word." But even after these sacrifices, she finds that "still inside me, coiled deep, was the need to know ... Are you cheating on me?"

As she breaks this silence, the floodgates open, so to speak, and we see Beyoncé emerge from a house filled with water where she appears to be drowning, shedding her black clothing for a spectacular yellow dress and flowing blond curls, the water spilling out at her feet. This opens the song "Hold Up," where Beyoncé expresses the potential and limitations of anger and the stereotype of the angry black woman, playing with and against the stereotype in a way similar to her use of the strong black woman stereotype in the earlier sections. Beyoncé walks through a downtown that appears to be pulled out of the 1970s, judging by the cars and storefronts, but young men wearing hip hop fashion

are featured, continuing the merging of past and future that characterized the opening segment. She is handed a bat by a young black girl, and begins smashing car and storefront windows, an expression of joy on her face, as she sings the song, “Hold Up,” over a Caribbean-inflected backing track. Perhaps the centerpiece of the song is the refrain, in which Beyoncé sings “What's worse, lookin' jealous or crazy? / Jealous or crazy? / Or like being walked all over lately, walked all over lately / I'd rather be crazy.” Here, Beyoncé signifies on the stereotype of the jealous, “crazy” woman, and of course, the angry black woman. But the anger is transmuted to joy in the visuals, as she smashes the cap off of a fire hydrant and black children dance in the spray from the hydrant. The image of children playing in an open fire hydrant is an iconic image of urban life. For urban populations, and specifically African American and immigrant communities, this iconic image also signifies a reclamation and repurposing of public space and public works, which so often confine these populations, as spaces of play and joy.

In the contemporary moment, a significant factor impacting public space and public urban space in particular is institutional surveillance, and this surveillance has a particularly negative history and resonance for African American populations. Beyoncé signifies on this as well in *Lemonade*, as she first primps herself in the lens of a police surveillance camera and then smashes it. She follows this by smashing the window of a beauty salon, a blow perhaps to confining stereotypes of feminine beauty, and then literally breaks the fourth wall, turning her bat on the camera filming her, knocking it to the ground, as the screen turns to black and white.<sup>x</sup> She finally hops into a monster truck and drives over cars on the street, taking her low-technology destruction higher-tech,

appropriating an exaggerated version of a symbol typically associated with masculinity (the pickup truck) to destroy everything in her path.

The section of the film labeled “Anger” also comments in meta- fashion on the intersections of black and female identity. It opens with another spoken word segment in which Beyoncé delivers the lines: “If it's what you truly want ... I can wear her skin over mine. Her hair over mine. Her hands as gloves. Her teeth as confetti. Her scalp, a cap. Her sternum, my bedazzled cane. We can pose for a photograph, all three of us. Immortalized ... you and your perfect girl.” Aside from being a jarring and evocative expression of a scorned lover, the lines serve as a metaphor for the way that stereotypes and standards of feminine beauty, mediated in the 21st century through communications technologies, impact real-life relationships. The ways we see one another are impossible to disentangle from these images of ideal womanhood (and femininity, and blackness, and so on, ad infinitum) that circulate around us.

In effect, it is almost as if we view others’ bodies as though they are wearing these other “skins,” similarly to Beyoncé’s wearing a fur coat in *Lemonade*’s opening image. The poem’s sense of the interchangeability of women’s “skins” also speaks to the leveling objectification faced by women in popular media, and women of color in particular. And of course as one of the most (hyper-)visible black celebrities of her time, the “skins” and stereotypes which are superimposed upon Beyoncé (and, perhaps, even those closest to her like her husband) are exponentially multiplied, much like Ellison’s Louis Armstrong. She addresses this inability for her, and also perhaps, for black women generally to gain accurate recognition, with the lines “Why can't you see me? Why can't you see me? Why can't you see me? Everyone else can.” Aside from expressing the

specific condition of the celebrity in the 21st century mediascape, this also speaks to the paradox of simultaneous black hyper-/in-visibility observed by Ellison and contemporary thinkers on blackness and black femininity like Harris-Perry.

Beyoncé links the hyper/invisibility of celebrity to the condition of black womanhood more generally in the next song “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” when, after beginning with the lines, “Who the fuck do you think I am? / You ain’t married to no average bitch boy,” she declares, “Call me Malcolm X,” and the song cuts to a clip of Malcolm X from a 1962 speech, in which he says “The most disrespected person in American is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.” These lines are sampled over grainy shots of anonymous black women. This links Beyoncé’s personal struggles for recognition (the song, like most on the album, is ostensibly directed at a cheating husband) to the larger struggles faced by black people and black women specifically around issues of visibility and recognition. Some of the most famous lines from the Malcolm X speech she samples deal with appearances, and the body: “Who taught you to hate the color of your skin? Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips? Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of your feet?”

In the section of the film entitled “Apathy,” Beyoncé further plays with this connection between the condition of the black female celebrity and black womanhood generally. The song “Sorry,” which leads up to this section, features tennis star Serena Williams dancing provocatively for Beyoncé, who sits on a chair in the Louisiana plantation house. Williams has, like Beyoncé, achieved a level of international fame that

has seen her body transformed into a larger than life icon of black womanhood that is often interpreted through the lens of stereotype. In particular, Williams' public persona tends to be filtered through two opposing stereotypes of black femininity, that of the black woman as sexually unattractive, even masculine, and that of the black woman as hypersexualized.

These dueling stereotypes have played themselves out throughout Williams' career, but two high-profile incidents stand out. First, in 2012, Danish tennis player Caroline Wozniacki jokingly "impersonated" Williams by stuffing her top and skirt with tennis balls. While Williams considers Wozniacki a friend and did not read racism into the incident, it is easy to see how many did, and the resonances of stereotypes of black femininity that can be traced through Venus Hottentot to contemporary black women like Beyoncé and Williams are obvious. And subsequently, in 2014, Russian Tennis Federation president Shamil Tarpishev publicly joked about Williams and her sister Venus, calling them "brothers" and deemed their appearance "scary." Taken on their own, perhaps these individual types of incidents may be interpreted as not being racist (or not intentionally or overtly racist, anyways), but the outrage and hurt that they sparked is an important reminder that for celebrities like Williams and Beyoncé, their bodies are not entirely their own. This feeling of not having control over one's body is a feeling familiar to many women raced as black who live their lives outside of the public eye. This is why Claudia Rankine (whose focus on embodied black experience I will examine in the next chapter) writes of Williams, "The daily grind of being rendered invisible, or being attacked, whether physically or verbally, for being visible, wears a body down. Serena's strength and focus in the face of the realities we shared oddly consoled me."

Williams was also notably taken to task after doing a victory dance that many identified as the “Crip Walk,” a move developed by gang members in Compton, CA in the 1970s. Predictably, much media hand-wringing ensued. And so as Williams dances, twerking for a seated Beyoncé (reposing legs-spread, to the lyric “suck my balls) in a scene evocative of a strip club, but taking place in a plantation house, it is hard not to keep in mind the ways in which the iconography of black celebrities like Beyoncé and Williams traffics far beyond their own bodies. The two women’s clear self-consciousness regarding their uses of their body brings new resonances to the lyrics of the song (once again, ostensibly delivered to an unfaithful lover), “I’m sorry / I ain’t sorry . . . Middle fingers up / I ain’t thinkin’ ‘bout you.” This section of the film seems to represent a symbolic reclamation of the black female body that is underlined in the subsequent song “6 Inch,” with its chorus “Six inch heels, she walked in the club like nobody’s business, / Goddamn, she murdered everybody and I was her witness” and its visual imagery of Beyoncé burning down the house in which Williams had danced. The song also features a sample of Isaac Hayes’ “Walk on By” (written by Burt Bacharach), signifying on another artist who became, in part by virtue of his soundtracking of the 1971 film *Shaft*, a pivotal figure in his own right in the trafficking (and reclaiming) of the black body in popular culture.

The ending of “6 Inch,” with Beyoncé standing in front of the burning house, a group of black women standing behind her facing the camera, marks the halfway point of the *Lemonade* film, and the beginning of the section, “Accountability.” Early in this segment, we hear an anonymous black male speaking about getting to meet Barack Obama. We see a black man driving a car on a rainy day, and a voice (presumably his),

says, “Before I met him, you dig, I didn’t really see myself going nowhere... You know, I didn’t really care if I lived or died. Now I feel like I gotta live, man, for my kids and stuff.” He says that Obama gives him “inspiration” to “be whatever he wants to be,” which, he says, is to “be the next Spike Lee and shit or something.” These invocations of Obama and Lee, both iconic figures of black success, again underline one of the larger points being made in *Lemonade*: that these icons of blackness are not self-contained subjectivities, and that their success is intimately, if often vaguely and indefinably, connected to the subjectivities of everyday black people in America.

Even Beyoncé herself recognizes that a substantial piece of her own inheritance comes from the circulation of black womanhood in popular culture. And so, coming out of a spoken word section in which she says, “If we’re gonna heal, let it be glorious. One thousand girls raise their arms. Do you remember being born? Are you thankful for the hips that cracked? The deep velvet of your mother and her mother and her mother? There is a curse that will be broken,” we hear Nina Simone, singing “I love you so” at the end of her version of “The Look of Love” (also, coincidentally, written by Burt Bacharach), and we see the album on which that song featured, 1967’s *Silk and Soul*, sitting next to a turntable. As I discussed earlier, this invocation of Simone right before shots of Beyoncé singing (and recording herself singing) “Sandcastles” represents a prime example of *Lemonade*’s meta-awareness of itself as a piece of art. And further, it is an acknowledgment on Beyoncé’s part that her place in black culture, and simply her identity as a black woman, is thoroughly imbricated with the cultural history of blackness lived by both her actual parents and grandparents, but also her cultural parents, of which Simone is surely one.



Perhaps the album's ultimate moment of meta-awareness comes in the performance of the song "Sandcastle," which also features Beyoncé singing the song to her husband. But unlike the Jay-Z we are accustomed to as a pop cultural icon, and even as he appears in other Beyoncé videos like "Crazy In Love," here he is silent, listening to her song, and even kissing her feet. Certainly, Beyoncé is intentionally playing to those who would speculate that the album in its entirety is about specific infidelities that occurred in her real-life marriage. But given the mediation of the Simone record that the song's video begins with, we might also see it as a sort of meta- acknowledgment and subsequent unsettling of the popular cultural baggage that Beyoncé and Jay-Z's performative personas (and their marriage itself) come along with. By silencing the normally boisterous and braggadocious rapper and by giving glimpses into these intimate moments (which are, of course, themselves recorded, public performances, emphasized by the fact that the song ends with Beyoncé again alone at her piano, recording), backed by a ballad (certainly not the form that Beyoncé is most known for), the video furthers the album's blurring of reality and fiction, and unsettles notions of black masculine and feminine subjectivities. Beyoncé in this segment is neither wholly "real" nor "simulated," nor is she entirely the "angry" or the "strong" black woman. There is anger in lyrics like "Dishes smashed on the counter from our last encounter / Pictures smashed out the frame / Bitch, I scratched out your name and your face," and there is strength in bearing the burdens of her man in lines like "Show me your scars and I won't walk away." But ultimately, Beyoncé settles somewhere in between, a space that is simultaneously strong and vulnerable.

We move, in the subsequent “Resurrection” section, again, from a moment of intimacy between a black woman and man, to connect to the wider black experience. Specifically, under the male voice of James Blake singing the song “Forward” with Beyoncé, we see shots of the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, and others holding framed photographs of their sons. These shots are shown over a spoken word segment wherein Beyoncé describes a dream about giving birth herself. She intones, “The first girl emerges from a slit in my stomach. The scar heals into a smile. The man I love pulls the stitches out with his fingernails. We leave black sutures curling on the side of the bath. I wake as the second girl crawls headfirst up my throat, a flower blossoming out of the hole in my face.” This leads into the politically incendiary and upbeat “Freedom,” which features Kendrick Lamar, a rapper of the younger generation who grew up on the music of Jay-Z (and Beyoncé), and also features visuals of Beyoncé with the singers Ibeyi, and Chloe and Halle Bailey, contemporary female artists to whom Beyoncé is something of a foremother. Beyoncé’s performance of the song again takes place on a stage, along with dancing by a black ballerina, Michaela De Prince, who immigrated to the United States from war-ravaged Sierra Leone at age four.

Lamar’s lyrics on “Freedom” speak to the fact that blackness as identity is necessarily articulated against the background of popular cultural stereotypes. In lines delivered using numbers in a manner signifying on Mos Def’s “Mathematics,” and also perhaps the Notorious B.I.G.’s “Ten Crack Commandments,” among other songs that use the technique, Lamar raps, “Channel 9 news tell me I’m movin’ backwards / Eight blocks left, death is around the corner / Seven misleadin’ statements ‘bout my persona / Six headlights wavin’ in my direction / Five-O askin’ me what’s in my possession.” Lamar

connects individual interactions with police to his “persona” and the images of him (and perhaps black men more generally) on television news.

The final song in the film version of *Lemonade*, “All Night,” heads the section of the film entitled, “Redemption,” and is as triumphant as the title would lead one to believe. The song plays over images of couples and families, primarily black couples and families loving one another, including Jay-Z and Beyoncé. The shots of Jay-Z and Beyoncé are again revealing. In one, which looks like it was probably shot on a phone, they look at the camera, before both donning dark sunglasses. Again, the lines between reality and fiction, truth and the performative mask come into play. In another, we see shots from their actual wedding, with the couple feeding each other bites of wedding cake as cameras flash. This, along with the interspersed shots of anonymous couples and families, is a link between the celebrities’ existence and those of their audiences. So many of us have engaged in this ceremonial moment, so many of us have eaten cake while cameras flashed, though the cameras at Beyoncé’s wedding may have been those from TMZ and E! in addition to those of relatives and friends. Also included are videos of Beyoncé when she was pregnant with the couple’s child, Blue Ivy, and of Beyoncé and Jay-Z playing with their daughter.

One of these shots in particular toward the very end of the film brings together the themes of love, spectacle, and blackness that permeate the album. We see Jay-Z playing with Blue Ivy on the field at the Louisiana Superdome. First of all, evoking this intimate family moment in the context of professional football, probably one of the most blatant examples of postmodern American spectacle, seems to reiterate the theme, carried through the album, of identity as performance. And it also depicts love, for Beyoncé and

Jay-Z, and perhaps many of the rest of us, as something that must be actively built, in the midst of the imageries of love given to us through our various media and devices. The love in *Lemonade* is a black love specifically, and the setting is significant in this sense. The Superdome was a “shelter of last resort” for primarily poor black residents of New Orleans who were unable to evacuate the city when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. Conditions at the Superdome were far from ideal, with a lack of food, water and supplies provided to evacuees, and three reported deaths before the thousands of people stranded were evacuated by September 4, 2005. Given Beyoncé’s invocation of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina in the video for “Formation,” this reinvisioning of the Superdome, a significant site of both postmodern spectacle and racially-charged tragedy, as a re-envisioned venue for black familial love is striking.

As a piece of her critique of the album, hooks writes of *Lemonade* that the album “glamorizes a world of gendered cultural paradox and contradiction. It does not resolve.” From a certain vantage point, perhaps this is a fair criticism, and it is difficult to argue with hooks’ description of the album as “the business of capitalist money making at its best.” However, in addition to being a capitalist spectacle, the album also undeniably reaches an enormous audience, speaking in particular to and provoking discussions among its black female audiences. And for these audiences, from a pragmatic standpoint, a significant piece of what *Lemonade* and Beyoncé have to say is about how to live with the very sorts of contradictions and lack of resolution that characterize postmodern existence generally, and existence as black and female in twenty-first century America specifically. Baudrillard, for example, views the implosion of binary systems of meaning, and thus the impossibility of any sort of “resolution” of the kind hooks references, as key

features of the postmodern moment generally. He defines implosion as “The absorption of one pole into another, the short-circuiting between poles of every differential system of meaning, the erasure of distinct terms and oppositions, including that of the medium and of the real” (83). Baudrillard sees this implosion of polarities as creating a situation in which “any mediation, . . . any dialectical intervention between the two or from one to the other” as an impossibility (83). I find that a major piece of the appeal of black aesthetics, with the hip hop aesthetic being perhaps the most developed iteration of this to date (and *Lemonade* being a particularly important achievement within this aesthetic), is their comfort in occupying this sort of contradiction.

#### **“This is a Movie”: Nicki Minaj’s Meta-Jezebel**

Speaking of contradiction, a comparison of Nicki Minaj to Beyoncé (at least to Beyoncé’s contemporary more politically motivated aesthetic) might not seem to make sense. Minaj’s aesthetic and persona is explicitly focalized around her sexuality. Her lyrics are sexually explicit, her outfits are provocative, and her songs are an ingrained part of strip club culture. While there is a certain defiant sexuality present in *Lemonade* (see, for example, the dance scene with Serena Williams), for the most part, Beyoncé eschews overt displays of sexuality on the album. However, performances of sexuality not completely unlike Minaj’s helped to establish Beyoncé as a commercial music presence early in her career, allowing her to do the sort of exploration of a black female identity in the interstices of the “angry” and “strong” black woman that she undertakes in *Lemonade*.<sup>xi</sup> While the sexuality in *Lemonade* is certainly more powerful and controlled than that of “Bootylicious” and other early Beyoncé material, critics’ relative dismissal of

the sexual agency in Beyoncé's early work overlooks the thorny reality that it was these overt and more commercially-oriented displays of sexuality, along with her uniquely powerful singing voice and songwriting skills, upon which Beyoncé built the power she exerts on *Lemonade*.

As a part of a subsequent generation of women in hip hop, Minaj builds her own meta-black aesthetic effectively on the shoulders of Beyoncé and female artists like her. The critical ambivalence around Beyoncé's more overt sexualized expressions are symptomatic of anxieties in feminism generally, and hip hop feminism in particular. As I will show, Minaj makes a point of taking these anxieties, and the displays of sexuality that women in hip hop have often been forced to embrace, to their extremes, and in doing so, offers a meta-commentary on the role of women in hip hop. Simultaneously, like Beyoncé, she carves out a space for her own articulation of a surprisingly nuanced meta-black femininity. She does so through her use of multiple personae, her exploitation of stereotypes around femininity and blackness, and her signification on previous generations of women in commercial hip hop.

In the contemporary popular cultural marketplace, it has become a truism that "sex sells," thus raising the questions, fundamental to hip hop feminism, of whether female artists can achieve mainstream success without to some extent exploiting their sexualities, and whether any agency can be found in these sexual displays. These questions have of course yet to be resolved, as the title of Whitney Peoples' assessment of hip hop feminism, "'Under Construction': Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second-Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms" implies. Peoples writes of hip hop feminism:

The agenda of some feminists toward hip-hop has shifted from one aimed primarily at critique to one of uplift, not of the music, but of segments of the population who consume it, specifically young African-American women and girls . . . In much of the literature written by hip-hop feminists, feminism emerges as something of a savior for all of the ‘lost souls’ represented by young women and girls listening to rap music and living the culture of hip-hop without the critical eye that feminism promises. (28)

It is significant that the notion of uplift comes into play here. Similar to earlier black thinkers like Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson’s feeling that educated, cultured African Americans such as themselves could uplift simple folk and popular black musical forms, some hip hop feminists feel that the lens of feminism can redeem female consumers of sexually debased popular hip hop music, and perhaps even create a new generation of “conscious” female hip hop artists informed by feminism. And if *Lemonade* is to be any indication, perhaps they are right. But again, we return to the fact that Beyoncé built the podium from which she speaks in *Lemonade* in part upon the very kinds of displays of black sexualities which make some hip hop feminists understandably uncomfortable. Of course, as I have shown earlier, Du Bois and Johnson’s attitudes towards folk and popular black music were more complex than simplified conceptions of uplift imply, and hip hop feminism is similarly too complex to be contained by an uplift paradigm. Gwendolyn Pough, for example, examines Foxy Brown and Lil’ Kim specifically in her genre-defining *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop*

*Culture, and the Public Sphere*, and finds that though these rappers “draw heavily on American social/racial stereotypes of black women as sexually promiscuous, they simultaneously disrupt black community norms that silence black female sexuality and encourage shame around it for black women and girls” (Peoples 24).

Pough does not necessarily ascribe consciousness of this radical perspective on black female sexuality to artists like Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown themselves, however. Their work, as Peoples observes, requires, at least partially, the explication that hip hop feminism provides to actualize its radical potential. This uplift perspective is one that Pough explicitly elaborates in a 2006 interview when she says:

people are talking about how the artists themselves need to be more responsible and they need to put positive images out and etc., etc. I think that it's really going to come from the educators and the activists, the people who are working with youth. I mean, you can't depend on Jay-Z to lead us to the revolution. No matter how much we admire Kanye West when he speaks out, he's not the second coming of Dr. King. So, we need to take these moments where there is something in the music that we can latch onto and talk with the youth about issues as pedagogical moments, as teaching moments. (809)

Certainly, one would have to work to read feminist consciousness into the work of artists like these. However, even figures like Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown, and the subsequent generation of female hip hop artists leveraging their sexualities to achieve commercial success, are more aware of their positions and the cultural work they are performing for



their audiences than they are often credited for. Of this new generation of female rappers, Nicki Minaj is probably the most visible in terms of her displays of female sexuality.

Minaj is a figure who many might pose as the obverse of the self-actualizing, uplifting black sexuality represented by Beyoncé. However, I find that by applying the lens of meta-blackness to her music and her carefully constructed and cultivated persona(e), we can see that Minaj is performing her own kind of meta-aware cultural work with and against the Jezebel stereotype (and with and against earlier iterations of black female sexuality in hip hop, Lil' Kim in particular). It is certainly far more difficult to make the argument for the redemptive, resistant power of Minaj's output than for Beyoncé. However, as I have observed in regards to Beyoncé and popular artists generally, perhaps we should focus less on trying to find "resistance" in their work and instead look at the ways that these black female artists reflect and model modes of black femininity as it is lived. In the case of Minaj, it seems that at least a piece of the cultural work that her music and image perform is to model a meta-black mode of making space (and a material fortune) for herself as a black female performer in the hypermasculine realm of commercial hip hop. And I would argue that this, the exploitation of stereotype in order to exceed stereotype, is a critical piece of what her audience (in particular, her black female audience) finds so compelling about her.

Harris-Perry cites Minaj, along with Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, as evidence of the way that "as hip-hop aged, the space for black women's voices narrowed" (65). She writes that in this era of hip hop music, from the mid-1990s on, "Instead of offering a forum for sisters to voice their own truths, hip-hop made black women into silent, scantily clad figures who writhe willingly behind male artists" (65). Other critics have

had more ambivalent takes on Minaj and her sexuality. Nina Cartier discusses Minaj in her article, “Black Women On-Screen as Future Texts: A New Look at Black Pop Culture Representations,” and she does offer that “Minaj expands the space of what can be allowed for black female representation by eschewing the game of respectability altogether and casting the tropes of black female representation aside” (154). But the larger context of this quote is her argument that Minaj “took Lil’ Kim’s image, wholesale, then disparaged Lil’ Kim for not being her. And we bought it” (154). Cartier goes on to say that she is “not so sure we can keep buying it” because “we may wonder whether she is trying to transcend these tropes or whether she is ignorant of the ideological work the tropes perform” (154). Whether Minaj “transcends” these tropes is debatable, to be sure, but it would be hard to argue that she is “ignorant” of them, as she is constantly being criticized along these lines.

Minaj has become well-known for her various feuds with several rappers, and Lil’ Kim is among those that she has had disagreements with. The rift itself is revealing of Minaj’s meta- perspective on her own persona and place in hip hop culture vis à vis her female predecessors, Lil Kim in particular. And it is also revealing of the fact that while the progressiveness of her oeuvre can certainly be questioned, she is certainly aware of at least some of the ideological work that the tropes she engages with perform. Upset because she felt that Minaj had stolen her style without giving her credit, Lil’ Kim began taking shots at Minaj in interviews and in her lyrics, culminating with her 2011 mixtape, *Black Friday*, a clear play on the title of Minaj’s 2010 studio album, *Pink Friday*. On the title track, Lil’ Kim raps that Minaj is “a Lil’ Kim wannabe, you just hate to admit it / I’m the blueprint, you ain’t nothing brand new.” At least one source for Kim’s claim that

Minaj is simply stealing her image comes from a promotional shot for Minaj's 2008 mixtape, *Sucka Free*, in which Minaj is pictured recreating an iconic photo from Lil' Kim's 1996 album *Hard Core*, in which she is squatting spread-eagle clad only in a bikini.

In the photo, Minaj is clearly playfully signifying on Lil' Kim and her image, and Kim takes this as an affront. Asked about their feud in an interview, Minaj replied, "I got nothing but love for her, I think she is one of the key players in this female rap thing, so you can not do nothing but salute Kim." Originality and authenticity in hip hop are issues fraught with contradiction. For all of the sampling and intertextuality upon which the form is based, claims to authenticity and originality continue to hold weight for those in the hip hop community, and to be called out for being "fake" or "biting" another artist's style remains a potent insult. The distinction between sampling as artistry and homage and outright biting is consistently up for debate by fans and artists, and this poses particular difficulty for female artists. Already viewed by some in the hypermasculine hip hop community as interlopers, instances of artistic sampling by female artists may be more likely to be interpreted as short cuts or acts of theft rather than meta-commentary. This is a piece of what I hope to push back against in an analysis of Minaj's aesthetic. To read Minaj, in her sampling of Lil' Kim's image and her aesthetic generally, through this binaristic frame of authentic/fake and original/copy is to miss the point. Minaj applies the meta-, self-reflexive aesthetics foundationally embedded in hip hop to her expressions of her sexuality. She is defiantly "fake," or inauthentic, from her body, famously rumored to be artificially "enhanced," to the multiple personae that she takes on in her music. On her mixtapes and albums, she raps and sings in multiple voices, taking on characters, male

and female, such as Harajuku Barbie, Roman Zolanski, Nicki the Ninja, and Nicki the Boss.

Hip hop has a long history of rappers taking on different personae in their music, but Minaj, as in many aspects of her aesthetic, takes this sort of multiple personality disorder to its extreme. The result, particularly in the case of her Barbie persona, is a more savvy commentary on her use of her sexuality to effect material success than some would recognize. Appropriating, as a defiantly lewd black female rapper, what is perhaps commercial culture's most iconic and unrealistic standard of white feminine beauty, and calling attention to its plastic inauthenticity (see her doll-like pose on the cover for *Pink Friday*), belies a self-awareness about the ways that black female sexuality can be expressed in popular culture, and in hip hop in particular. And Lil' Kim, herself an iconic figure of black female sexuality in hip hop's discursive universe, is one of the building blocks that Minaj uses to construct her own unique meta-black and meta-feminine subjectivity within the culture. So when Lil' Kim calls out Minaj on "Black Friday" for being "a put together gimmick, something like a collage," she is actually cutting to the heart of what Minaj is up to aesthetically. Minaj opens the song, "The Crying Game," on her 2014 album, *The Pinkprint* (for which she also made a 16-minute film which interpolates several of the album's songs, perhaps inspired by *Beyoncé*), by declaring, "This is a movie." In the context of the *Pinkprint* movie, she is straightforwardly breaking down the fourth wall, but this line also expresses her awareness of the meta-performativity of her aesthetic.

While the redemptive qualities of Minaj's meta-black expressions such as her personae, her meta-awareness of her art as spectacle, and her signification on previous

iconic women in hip hop can certainly be debated, what cannot be argued is Minaj's conscious use of the strategy. And this strategy of exaggerated fakery, of constructing a self out of multiple selves, and particularly out of stereotypical images and iconographies of femininity, black female sexuality, and hip hop culture itself, ultimately seems to be aimed at constructing what is, paradoxically, an "authentic" subjectivity. The body of academic critical takes on Minaj remains somewhat thin, but is growing rapidly. In general, these critics often focus on Minaj's defiant lack of authenticity. Putting Minaj in the context of "postfeminism," for example, Jess Butler cites Minaj's "fractured positionality" (53). Jennifer Dawn Whitney similarly finds that Minaj questions the very notion of an "authentic and cohesive feminine identity" (155). Uri McMillan connects Minaj's use of personae to hip hop culture's ongoing debates over authenticity, writing that through her "aggressive aesthetic acts, Minaj not only crashes hip-hop's proverbial boys club, but also refuses its constitutive element – a street-savvy authenticity, or 'realness' – in favor of girly artifice" (80). There is, no doubt, a very conscious use of artifice in Minaj's aesthetic; however, I would argue that in her fragmented use of the "inauthentic," we can actually find Minaj modeling in meta-black fashion for her audience (her "Barbz," as she calls them) a mode of articulating a nuanced subjectivity out of these fragments of circulating blackness, femininity, and hip hop cultural history.

The cover for *The Pinkprint* is revealing in this sense. The album's title itself signifies on Jay-Z's classic 2001 album, *The Blueprint*, and thus, Minaj is invoking the stuff of (male) hip hop lore to place herself in the genre. But the album's cover shows a fingerprint smudge made in pink makeup over a black background. Minaj, throughout her career, does a lot with the color pink, taking the stereotypically feminine color to neon

extremes, and this image is no exception. The makeup, used to mask the face, and to conform to standards of feminine beauty, is smudged. And it is significant that the smudge is made by a fingerprint, an iconic symbol of individual uniqueness. The image sums up in some ways, then, the kind of meta- identity work that Minaj exemplifies. By smudging or skewing stereotypes of feminine beauty and black female sexuality, by taking performative masking to self-conscious extremes, she attempts to express a nuanced, unique individual subjectivity. Critics can and will debate whether the particular subjectivity that she expresses has a positive or negative effect on her black female audience. However, it seems that she is, at the very least, modeling for them, in ways similar to what Beyoncé achieves in *Lemonade*, a way in which a black female subjectivity can be articulated in a contemporary moment where inauthentic, technologically reproduced sounds, images, and stereotypes of blackness and black femininity swirl dizzyingly in the cultural ether.

### **Conclusion:**

From Du Bois's notion double consciousness to Ellison's meditations on the hyper-/in-visibility paradox, to hip hop's play with masking the binaries of original/copy (indebted to earlier black musical and cultural genres), black subjectivity has always had to express itself from a space of paradox and contradiction. And this seems to be doubly, or intersectionally so for black females, as they, especially in the hypermasculine realm of hip hop culture, have to contend with an intersecting but distinct set of disjuncts between how the world sees them and how they see themselves. While resolution of the contradiction may be the ultimate goal, much of the stuff of navigating everyday life for

postmodern subjects of color, and especially for postmodern female subjects of color, is figuring out how to liveably occupy these contradictions while undermining them enough to clear space for a selfhood that exceeds them. This is central to the meta-black aesthetic that I describe, and it is, with all of its contradiction and paradox, at the heart of the aesthetic power of both *Lemonade* and Nicki Minaj's meta- play with black female identity.

But for all of the similarities in their meta-black engagement with blackness and femininity as they circulate, Minaj and Beyoncé (particularly the Beyoncé of *Lemonade*) represent two divergent strands of meta-blackness. Where Minaj embraces the play to be found in postmodern identity as performance, *Lemonade* uses personal, embodied trauma as a means to connect to the material trauma that has been visited upon black people in America since their arrival. Where Minaj revels in fragmentation, Beyoncé is, as Simmons puts it, "calling for black women to be made whole after centuries of loss." While there are certainly regressive elements of Minaj's aesthetic, and while of course Beyoncé's visual album alone cannot make black women "whole," what I have argued is that a significant piece of these two artists' appeal lies in the meta- mode of subjectivity that they model for their black female audiences.

As I have noted, they approach this subjectivity from very different angles, but in fact, this tension between the possibility to be found in playful performances of identity and the need to tend to the material and psychological wounds exacted upon black bodies is fundamental to the meta-black aesthetic that I have observed, and to contemporary African American lived experience. As such, it is not surprising that this tension also forms a key piece of debates, in scholarly and more mainstream forums, over the

coherence of postmodern black identity and its utility in contemporary struggles for black liberation. Thus, as a way of reflecting on these conversations and considering where a meta-black aesthetic fits in debates between so-called “Black Optimists” and “Afro-Pessimists,” I will turn in what follows to two paradigmatic literary expressions of the contemporary meta-black aesthetic, Percival Everett’s 2009 novel, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, and Claudia Rankine’s 2014 poetry collection, *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Both texts, as I will show, provocatively wrestle (albeit in very different ways) with the tension and contradiction inherent in contemporary black identity.

### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Such transhistorical comparisons can be leveling, however it seems worth mentioning that Smith and Holiday in particular have interesting parallels to Minaj and Beyoncé: Smith and Minaj with their brazen but sly sexuality, and Holiday and Beyoncé as hugely popular artists toeing the line between pop superstardom and political engagement around racial issues.

<sup>ii</sup> Hip hop feminism is of course indebted to the black feminism movement, which coalesced in the 1960s in response to the lack of attention to race being paid by second-wave feminists, and also sexism within the Civil Rights/Black Power movements. Arguing for the intersectionality of identity, black feminists argue that race and gender equality cannot be achieved independently.

<sup>iii</sup> Frederic Jameson makes a similar point regarding popular culture generally in “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” when he writes that, “Capitalism systematically dissolves the fabric of all cohesive social groups without exception, including its own ruling class, and thereby problematizes aesthetic production and linguistic invention which have their source in group life” (140).

<sup>iv</sup> Some might not characterize Beyoncé, primarily a singer, as a hip hop artist, preferring to place her in the R&B and/or soul categories. While I certainly would not deny that she fits in the family tree of black female soul singers like Aretha Franklin and Nina Simone, I find that it is useful, given her consistent involvement, on both artistic and personal levels, with hip hop culture, to view her work through a hip hop lens. Perhaps the most accurate way to assess her work would be to use the term first applied in the 90s to Mary J. Blige and call Beyoncé a “hip hop soul” artist.

<sup>v</sup> In addition to the plantation-inspired dress, we also see, early in “Formation,” a man flanking Beyoncé wearing a red fez. This may be a more contemporary nod to collective (and material) black life in the 20th century. Unable to obtain financing for home ownership from banks, African Americans would often be able to get assistance from mutual aid societies. Many of these societies, by the 1930s, were evoking Islamic royalty in their dress, which included red fezzes. As Asher Kohn observes, “Allusions to Islam allowed members (no matter their ethnicity) to claim an exotic justification for esoteric



practices” (<https://timeline.com/you-might-have-missed-this-symbol-of-black-wealth-in-beyonc%C3%A9-s-formation-6a0728d4844>).

<sup>vi</sup> There was certainly a real strain of masculinism in certain facets of the Black Power movement, including the Black Panther Party. As Peniel Joseph observes, “The Black Power Movement, although varied by organization, attempted to redefine black women’s role as childbearers for the revolution” (111). However, as Joseph also importantly points out, “Contrary to popular myth, [...] black feminists certainly did not comply with these demands, [and] neither did they cede the terms of the liberation movement to black masculinism” (111).

<sup>vii</sup> The visual references to Dash’s film seem very clear and intentional, and the popularity of *Lemonade* even helped to spur a theatrical re-release of *Daughters of the Dust* in 2016.

<sup>viii</sup> Additionally, the visuals in this section of the film bring to mind the meta- work with Southern iconography of visual artist Kara Walker, particularly the ironically exaggerated silhouetted plantation images of exhibitions such as “Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through The South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself, Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored.”

<sup>ix</sup> Shire, a London-based black poet born in Kenya to Somali parents, writes all of the spoken word sections of *Lemonade*.

<sup>x</sup> In an additional bit of meta-awareness, the smashing of the camera could also be read as referencing the elevator surveillance camera that captured a fight between Jay-Z and Beyoncé’s sister, Solange, and started the tabloid rumor mill buzzing about the state of Beyoncé’s marriage and relationship with her sister.

<sup>xi</sup> Most critical takes on the album seem to view this as a welcome change. In an article on the album’s sexuality for *The Ringer*, Allison P. Davis writes “Bootylicious Beyoncé is not the only casualty of *Lemonade* [...], but it’s maybe the most welcome loss. Instead of singing about her cutesy jelly, 2016 Beyoncé is channeling the spirit of legendarily nasty funk singer Betty Davis and snarling about her ‘fat ass.’” Referring to the 2001 Destiny’s Child hit “Bootylicious,” Davis’s implication is that early in her career, Beyoncé’s use of her sexuality in her music was uncritical and used merely as a means of attaining commercial success, and that she is now more fully in control of how she displays her sexuality. Discussing “Bootylicious,” Davis writes that “At the time, it was probably her strongest assertion of being black and female, though that wasn’t saying much; a song calling attention to the fact that she had a butt, and that it was rotund, was hardly the dance-floor-friendly declaration of ownership it pretended to be.”

## CHAPTER 5

### TOWARDS AN OPTIMISTIC PESSIMISM: PERCIVAL EVERETT, CLAUDIA RANKINE, AND META-BLACK LITERARY AESTHETICS IN THE CONTEMPORARY MOMENT

#### Introduction:

This final chapter takes a dual approach to two texts that I read as contemporary iterations of the meta-black literary aesthetic: Percival Everett's 2009 novel, *I am Not Sidney Poitier*, and Claudia Rankine's 2014 poetry collection, *Citizen: an American Lyric*. On the surface, these texts do not appear to have much in common: on the level of form, one is a novel and one a collection of poetry, but a piece of what leads me to class them as meta-black is their respective play with these forms. While in some ways a classic literary bildungsroman, Everett's novel toys with this form, building the plot of his narrator's coming of age intertextually out of fragments of popular, mass-mediated culture. Likewise, Rankine playfully upends expectations for poetry, as much of *Citizen* is written in prose, and Rankine incorporates visual art and references to popular culture throughout her collection. This incorporation of mass-mediated culture, and specifically blackness as it has been represented in popular culture, along with the formal challenges that Rankine and Everett pose from the vantage of their different literary genres, is what leads me to find a dual examination of these works to be a productive window into the diverse ways in which a meta-black literary aesthetic manifests itself in the contemporary moment.

Some of these formal parallels notwithstanding, these two texts also provide a telling contrast in how meta- aesthetic techniques can be used to treat very different aspects of the racial situation in contemporary America. Everett's novel is suffused with

his trademark brand of absurdist humor around the issue of race, and ultimately proffers a relatively hopeful (if darkly humorous) vision of the possibilities to be found in postmodern performative blackness. Rankine's collection, on the other hand, arriving as it did amidst of the tragedies that spurred the protests in Ferguson, MO and the Black Lives Matter movement, is a simultaneously melancholic and indignant meditation on the bodily trauma of interpersonal microaggressions and mass-cultural macroaggressions. Looming over the possibilities for self-expression of performative blackness that Everett explores in his novel is of course the specter of institutionalized discipline and violence against black bodies. Rankine is very much concerned with the embodied toll that this aggression takes, and offers little of Everett's humorous deflection of the micro- and macroaggression. I find that these dual deployments of meta-black aesthetic techniques provide a snapshot of both the pitfalls and possibilities that this aesthetic holds in the contemporary moment; I suggest also that they may point to some unexpected confluence of ideas and important insights to be found in both sides of conversations between so-called "Black Optimists" and "Afro-Pessimists."

**Hypervisible Man: Techno-Performativity and Meta-Blackness in Percival Everett's *I Am Not Sidney Poitier***

In interviews and in his writing, Percival Everett has been notoriously evasive about the role of race and African American identity in his fiction. For instance, in a typical exchange from a 2005 interview, Jim Kincaid asks Everett, "What, for you, is race?" Everett responds, "It's when two or more people, dogs, horses or cars try to get to a distant point as fast as they can" (378). Kincaid later asks Everett whether he is "in

some way a black writer” (378); Everett gives a similarly playful but perhaps more telling answer: “I am a black writer the way you are a white professor or that man over there is a fat banker. You might point me out as a black writer when trying to betray me to the KKK or the Bush administration. If I get lost and you’re trying to tell the police what I look like, you will say, ‘He’s devastatingly handsome, tall and black’” (379). While of course Everett is in part merely engaging in some verbal parrying with Kincaid here, this statement reveals something about the way he treats race and racial identification in his fiction. For Everett, blackness is primarily a visual descriptor, one that is much more likely to tell us something more significant about the person doing the describing than the person being described. And further, questions like Kincaid’s might be viewed, from Everett’s perspective, as microaggressions themselves, or stand-ins for such microaggressions.

Proceeding from this point, many critics who have discussed Everett’s fiction claim that its project is defiantly to carve out space (in a uniquely curmudgeonly style) for African American writers whose writing does not fit neatly into stereotyped and popularly circulated versions of the “authentic” black experience.<sup>i</sup> This focus on an eclectic individualism over rote identification with a communal, authentic black identity certainly is an important element in Everett’s fiction. However, in critical writing on Everett, an overemphasis on his radical individualism results in the overlooking of a streak of pragmatic collectivism in regard to racial identity. We can see this in Everett’s answer to Kincaid’s question of whether he is a black writer: “You might point me out as a black writer when trying to betray me to the KKK or the Bush administration.” While Everett recognizes the fundamentally simulative, unreal nature of race, he also

acknowledges that historically, racial identity as visual and cultural signifier has had and continues to have real, material significance. This is a significance that, as he points out with his somewhat facetious references to the Ku Klux Klan and the George W. Bush administration (2001-09), has often had life-or-death consequences for black people in the US. So Everett's fiction in part advocates for a radical individualism and pushes back against external constraints placed on black artists while also recognizing the necessity for black subjects to work within what Samuel R. Delany has called a "socio-visual system" (393).<sup>ii</sup> Everett's novel *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009) is perhaps his most explicit elaboration to date of this paradox at the heart of postmodern black American identity as lived experience, whereby the individual and the communal can only be bridged by a performance of identity within and against mass-mediated and often stereotypical popular iconographies of blackness. The strategies that he elaborates to navigate this paradox are exemplary of the meta-black aesthetic that I outline.

My focus on postmodern African American identity as a performance negotiated in the context of mass cultural ideas and images of blackness owes a good deal, as I have noted, to such critics as Murray, Fred Moten, and Nicole Fleetwood.<sup>iii</sup> Of course, it also emerges from earlier phenomenologically attuned accounts of blackness by writers and thinkers whom I analyze, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin. Du Bois's famed notions of double consciousness and its resultant second sight -- "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (11) -- provide a useful early theorization of how raced subjects in America have always had to remain conscious of white Americans' (mis)conceptions of blackness, often quite literally for reasons of survival.<sup>iv</sup> This necessity perhaps explains the proliferation of tropes of black dualism

beyond Du Bois (Paul Laurence Dunbar's notion of "The Mask," for example) during this period. Baldwin builds on these important observations of the dual nature of black subjectivity in the mid- to late-twentieth century to account for the ways that culture and the increased circulation of (often distorted) images of blackness by means of emergent mass communications technology affect this doubled consciousness:

I believe . . . no American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull. . . . [I]t is this, this necessary ability to contain and even, in the most honorable sense of the word, to *exploit* the "nigger," which lends to Negro life its high element of the ironic and which causes the most well-meaning of their American critics to make such exhilarating errors when attempting to understand them. ("Many" 32-33)

Obviously, Baldwin is not making the claim that African Americans actually share character traits with Richard Wright's iconic fictional character. Rather, he points to the way that black subjects, and particularly black male subjects, remain cognizant of the looming specter of the stereotyped images of blackness that Bigger Thomas represents and of the circulation of these stereotypes in the American and global popular imagination, as well as the threat of succumbing to these stereotypes, in the manner of Baldwin's character Rufus Scott.

Recognizing the necessity of contending with popular imaginings of blackness, Moten makes a critical turn, observing a fundamental performativity to expressions of blackness when he writes that "[t]he cultural and political discourse on black pathology

has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place” (“Case” 177), including everyday self-representations by black people. He thus sees individual articulations of black identity as taking place in interstitial spaces, “operating at the nexus of the social and the ontological, the historical and the essential” (187). These crucial observations support Moten’s famous assertion that the “history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist” (*In* 1).

In *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, Everett elaborates a vision of performative blackness similar to that expressed by Fleetwood, who furthers Moten’s notion of performative blackness, examining how blackness “circulates,”<sup>v</sup> and has in fact saturated US culture from its beginnings. Fleetwood locates a resistant strain of black cultural expression in the visual sphere that “require[s] audiences to consider the very definition of blackness as problem, as perplexing, as troubling to the dominant visual field,” and she finds that these works “demonstrate that the visual sphere is a performative field where seeing race is not a transparent act; it is itself a ‘doing’” (7). This performative paradigm for understanding the articulation of black identity is important because it allows for a way to discuss the self-creation of black subjects that does not focus only on attempts to correct the negative, hypervisible stereotypes perpetuated within the dominant white gaze.<sup>vi</sup> The articulation of black subjectivity in Everett’s novel is effected neither in a radically individualist rejection of communal identification as “black,” nor in a wholehearted embrace of blackness as it is popularly portrayed and circulated. Rather, Everett elaborates a meta- mode of blackness in which the black subject works within and against the mass-mediated iconography of blackness, deconstructing stereotyped images while

simultaneously reconstructing a nuanced postmodern subjectivity that uses fragments of these popular images as the very building blocks of identity.<sup>vii</sup>

### **No Way Out?: Sidney Poitier and the “Grim Bind” of Twentieth-Century Black Performance**

In some ways, the film career and mystique surrounding Sidney Poitier represent a desire to counteract or correct these sorts of stereotypical images of African Americans, particularly African American males. Thus, we should not overlook the implications in Everett’s choice to focalize his young protagonist’s search for his identity in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* in relation to the actor and director Poitier, one of the most iconic figures in African American visual culture. As Hollywood’s first true black dramatic superstar, Poitier was undeniably a groundbreaking figure in film history. Coming out of an era in American film history when black actors were primarily allowed roles that portrayed them as servile or criminal or as mere entertainers or buffoons, Poitier’s roles, beginning with his 1950 portrayal of Dr. Luther Brooks, a black doctor who treats racist white patients in Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s film *No Way Out*, represented a significant shift in the Hollywood film industry’s depictions of African Americans. Throughout the 1950s and ’60s, Poitier became an increasingly iconic figure, and his work as an actor and later as a producer and director opened up significant space in the industry for black artists. However, because of his status as the industry’s most iconic African American actor (and one of the few veritable mainstream black leading actors) during this period, Poitier was often forced into a “representative” role with which he was not always comfortable.<sup>viii</sup>

The Poitier persona frequently became intertwined with the social upheaval surrounding issues of race during the 1950s and ’60s. As Aram Goudsouzian writes in his



biography of Poitier, “The civil rights movement had shaped the contours of Poitier’s career. Nonviolent demonstrations for black equality had forged a culture in which his image resonated, and his movies had engendered racial goodwill” (2). And as Donald Bogle puts it in his study of representations of African Americans in film, “in this integrationist age [the mid-1950s] Poitier was the model integrationist hero. . . . For the mass white audience, Sidney Poitier was a black man who had met their standards” (175). Poitier’s characters, particularly in the 1950s and early 1960s, indeed tended to be some variation of the dignified, intelligent black man standing up (but generally non-violently) to racial oppression. This portrayal of African American masculinity also appealed to black middle-class audiences. As Bogle further claims, “Poitier was also acceptable for black audiences. He was the paragon of black middle-class values and virtues” (176). But as the 1960s wore on and the divide between followers of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s non-violent strategy of resistance and the more aggressive approach espoused by Malcolm X and others intensified, Poitier increasingly drew criticism from members of the black community who saw the characters he played as representing an accommodationist stance.

Some went so far as to classify Poitier’s persona, both on- and offscreen, as an extension of Hollywood’s tradition of depicting black males in subservient roles, a character type that Bogle terms the “tom” (4). Bogle writes of Poitier, “in many respects his characters were still the old type that America had always cherished. They were the mild-mannered toms, throwbacks to the humanized Christian servants of the 1930s” (176). With an increased focus, especially within the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, on the need to reassert a powerful black masculinity, the

desexualized nature of Poitier's roles were also criticized. Calvin C. Hernton, for instance, noted in 1966 "a pattern, a systematic attempt to castrate Sidney Poitier in the movies. This signifies, insofar as Poitier in the movies must be a symbolic representation of America's concept of the Negro in general, the outright denial of manhood with reference to all black Americans" (64). Similarly, Baldwin, in a 1968 *Look* magazine profile of Poitier, noted, "In spite of the fabulous myths proliferating in this country concerning the sexuality of black people, black men are still used, in the popular culture, as though they had no sexual equipment at all" ("Sidney" 186). In the 1990s, Bogle wrote that Poitier was most often "depicted as too faithful a servant, the famous Poitier code . . . a mask for bourgeois complacency and sterility" (183).

Most, including Baldwin, Hernton, and Bogle, have not so much blamed Poitier as they have the constraints imposed on him by the film industry's desire to cater to a (largely white) mainstream audience. Yet there remained throughout the 1960s a good deal of frustration with Poitier from within the black community, a sense that his unique superstar status should bring with it a responsibility to push aggressively for more accurate depictions of African Americans in film. Poitier often bristled at this responsibility. Goudsouzian opens his biography of Poitier by recounting a 1967 press conference in which Poitier was bombarded by questions regarding the race riots occurring all around the country at the time. A frustrated Poitier demanded that reporters ask him questions that dealt with more than, as he put it, "the Negroness of my life" (qtd. in Goudsouzian 1). While the reporters at that press conference conceded to his request, this felt responsibility to the black American community continued to follow Poitier throughout his career. In describing the actor's reaction at that press conference,

Goudsouzian gets at a central paradox of Poitier's career when he writes, "Poitier stewed that day because the public could not separate the image from the man, and the man from his race. Yet his stardom had depended on the blurred line between entertainment and reality, on the public's willingness to understand race relations through the prism of the movies" (3-4).

I would argue that this paradox is a piece of what leads Everett to invoke Poitier and the iconography that he is associated with in his novel, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*. Poitier represents an extreme case, of course, but also a key moment in an evolving situation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in which black subjects in general increasingly must articulate their subjective identities within the context of a flood of mass-mediated (and often stereotyped) images of blackness. In this postmodern world, reality and image become increasingly inextricable, and this creates an especially precarious situation for the black subject. Baldwin speaks to the "grim bind" ("Sidney" 184) that he sees the black entertainer (and Poitier specifically) facing. He writes that this artist must work, to some extent, within the constraints of an industry bent on portraying a "self-perpetuating fantasy of American life" (183). So this black artist "knows, on the one hand, that if the reality of a black man's life were on that screen, it would destroy the fantasy totally. And on the other hand, he really has no right not to appear, not only because he must work, but also for all those people who need to see him." Thus, Baldwin concludes, "By the use of his own person, he must smuggle in a reality that he knows is not in the script" (184).

This sort of "smuggl[ing]" of black reality into the "script" of a hyperreal twenty-first century America is key to Everett's deployment of Poitier in his novel. First, his

young protagonist is named Not Sidney Poitier, even though as the novel progresses, he begins to bear an increasingly striking resemblance to the actor. Additionally, the novel itself is a sort of collage of bits and pieces of plot lines and characters from Poitier films, including *No Way Out* (1950), *Band of Angels* (1957), *The Defiant Ones* (1958), *Lilies of the Field* (1963), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), and *Buck and the Preacher* (1972).<sup>ix</sup> This sort of playful intertextuality and blurring of high and low culture are common enough elements of literary postmodernism (and of Everett's writing specifically), yet it seems that in this novel, Everett's referential focus through the figure of Poitier serves to be more than a nihilistic diversion from reality or an instance of postmodernist playfulness; instead, this intertextuality is a meta- means to "smuggle" some complex truths about the lived experience of black subjectivity into the mass-mediated scripts surrounding blackness proffered by a postmodern society.

Everett, as is his wont, has a great deal of fun throughout the novel with names and naming, most of which centers around his protagonist's confusing name. Young Not Sidney's mother is deceased, and he never knew his father, who "may or may not have been Sidney Poitier" (5). The true origins of his name remain a mystery, though oddly, after describing his mother's confusion when he asks about his name, it seems that despite his resemblance to the actor, the impetus for the name that Not Sidney finds most plausible is not that Poitier is his father or that his name is an attempt to differentiate him from the actor but rather "that my name had nothing to do with that actor at all, that *Not Sidney* was simply a name she had created, with no consideration of the outside world" (7). However, even if this were true, his name and his resemblance to Poitier cause a great deal of confusion for those comprising this outside world and eventually for Not

Sidney himself. There are numerous instances throughout the novel such as the one early on in which, on meeting his school superintendent and stating that his name is Not Sidney Poitier, the superintendent responds, “I can well imagine. . . . You do look a little like him. Now, what is *your* name?” (41).

In his naming of his protagonist and in the mix-ups it invariably causes throughout the text, Everett’s intentions go beyond merely turning his novel into an extended Abbott and Costello routine (though he does take an undeniable pleasure in slapstick in this and much of his other work) or a simple play on the old “they all look alike” stereotype. In the world of the novel, Not Sidney’s name could very well be entirely a product of his mother’s imagination, but by forcing his character constantly to disidentify with the iconic actor, Everett effectively dramatizes the “circulation” of blackness that Fleetwood observes, wherein, for black subjects, individual subjectivity and the discourse and mass-mediated iconography surrounding blackness often become conflated and intertwined in exceedingly complex ways. That is to say, Not Sidney’s name and his growing physical resemblance to Poitier make literal the way that postmodern black American subjects must work simultaneously within and against the ever-circulating regime of spectacular, popular cultural blackness in order to articulate their individual subjectivity in a way that white subjects, due to the generally unmarked status of whiteness in American culture, do not.<sup>x</sup>

This is perhaps not an especially groundbreaking observation about the novel or about Everett’s aesthetic generally. However, where most critics interpret Everett as merely criticizing and satirizing this postmodern black condition, it seems to me that in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* specifically, he goes beyond criticism and satire to explore some

of the possibilities for individual expressions of self working from within this condition to undermine it. And as a literary author who has been notoriously (and similarly in some ways to Poitier) ambiguous in terms of embracing the categorization of his work as “African American Literature,” this intertextual play with the form of the novel also offers for Everett a means of commenting on issues around race without pigeonholing himself as merely a “black writer.” These possibilities can be usefully illuminated through an unpacking of specific instances of Everett’s flipping the script of Poitier films in the novel; in particular, a close reading of the novel’s ending, in which Not Sidney “becomes” Sidney Poitier.

### **Guess Who’s Coming of Age? Troubling Unitary Selfhood in the Postmodern Bildungsroman**

One of the more prominent references to a Poitier film in the novel comes as Not Sidney first sets off from his Atlanta home and finds himself arrested for “bein’ a nigger” by a police officer in Peckerwood County, Georgia (48), who could be described as a grotesquerie of the cliché filmic white Southern police officer. The officer is described as a “nine-foot-tall, large-headed, large-hatted, mirror-sunglassed manlike thing,” and as he approaches Not Sidney’s vehicle, he has “one hairy-knuckled suitcase of a hand resting on his insanely large and nasty-looking pistol, the knuckles of the other hand dragging along the ground” (46). This monstrous exaggeration of the encounter between a young black man and a white police officer (which of course, in its substance, may not necessarily be that much of an exaggeration at all) is positioned at the very moment in Not Sidney’s bildungsroman when he leaves home for the first time and is set just before the first piece of the narrative that Everett cribs directly from a Poitier film; it therefore

seems designed to signal to Everett's readers that we are entering a zone of unreality or, at the least, a world wherein the reality of a mediated filmic world blends with that of the novel. This blending of the filmic into the narrative is furthered when Not Sidney is imprisoned and finds himself "[d]ressed in actual prison stripes that made me feel a little like Buster Keaton" (48); he thinks to himself, "I was sure that the cliché shower scene was certainly on the program" (51). In short, if it is not clear earlier in the novel as young Not Sidney is being raised after his mother's death by media mogul Ted Turner that this is a novel in which filmic and televisual realities become indistinguishable from any sort of "objective" reality, Not Sidney's arrest and imprisonment emphasize this point.

At this juncture in the narrative, the novel diverges into a rather direct pastiche of the 1958 Poitier film, *The Defiant Ones*, directed by Stanley Kramer and co-starring Tony Curtis. The film includes one of Poitier's most iconic roles and, in terms of its racial symbolism, one of his most didactic. Briefly, in the film, Curtis plays a white prisoner and Poitier a black prisoner who are chained together and forced to cooperate in order to escape from their chain gang. The symbolism around race relations is heavy-handed, to say the least. The film's iconic final scene, a scene that certainly cemented the view among some in the African American community of the Poitier screen persona as that of a tom, comes when Poitier's character, Noah Cullen, hops a train to escape the pursuing sheriff and tries to help Curtis's character, John "Joker" Jackson, onto the train (at this point in the narrative, they have managed to cut through their chains). He is unable to lift him onto the train, and rather than go on without him, Cullen falls to the ground with Joker, holding him as the sheriff and his posse arrive to capture them. Baldwin, in his profile of Poitier, wrote of this scene, "When Sidney jumps off the train

at the end because he doesn't want to leave his buddy, the white liberal people downtown were much relieved and joyful. But when black people saw him jump off the train, they yelled, 'Get back on the train, you fool'" ("Sidney" 184).<sup>xi</sup>

Initially, Everett replays the narrative of *The Defiant Ones* in his novel fairly faithfully, when Not Sidney is chained together with a white prisoner named Patrice, and they escape from an overturned bus. During their escape, Not Sidney describes Patrice to the blind white woman, Sis, who takes them in to her "shack right out of every hillbilly's origin fantasy" (60) as looking "a little like that old move [*sic*] star, Tony Curtis" (74). While there are various points in this sequence of the novel where Everett's plot subtly diverges from that of Kramer's film, the most critical is of course the ending. Not Sidney, Patrice, Sis, and Sis's son Bobo, whom Patrice has decided to take with them, set off together to catch a train for Atlanta; but after the white characters "drink themselves unconscious" the night that the train is scheduled to arrive, Not Sidney finds himself the only one awake. Everett writes, "I found an empty boxcar and easily climbed into it. Alone. I left them sleeping where they belonged, with one another" (79). Rather than having his protagonist sacrifice himself for his white counterpart, Everett rewrites the Poitier script to fulfill the desires of the black audience on viewing the original film that Baldwin observes and to emphasize the fact that Not Sidney is beginning to come into his own. Of course, as he jumps alone into the empty boxcar, Not Sidney's power is still compartmentalized primarily individually, supporting readings of the text as an assertion of oppositional individuality against overly generalized notions of "authentic" blackness; however, as the novel progresses, Everett goes on to trouble any such easy notions of discrete selfhood.



Not Sidney leaves the unconscious world of the filmic “reality” of *The Defiant Ones* only to encounter various other worlds wherein the filmic or televisual and the “real” blur. One chapter is based loosely on *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* while another is based on *Lilies of the Field*. In addition, a cartoonish Bill Cosby gives a satirical version of his famous “Pound Cake” speech at Not Sidney’s Morehouse College convocation (96-97), and Not Sidney purchases the successful “Negro Entertainment Television” network (114-15), run entirely by his Indian assistant Podgy, to mention only a few such blurrings of the novelistic world with the realm of popular culture. To complicate matters even further, the novel is interspersed with numerous dream sequences, which also draw liberally from the plots of Poitier films. This blurring of celluloid reality with novelistic reality and with dreams comes to a head at the novel’s climax, when, in a mash-up of the film plots of *Lilies of the Field* and *In the Heat of the Night*, Not Sidney helps a white policeman, à la Mr. Tibbs from the latter film, solve the murder of a man who looks exactly like Not Sidney in Smuteye, Alabama, where he ends up because a group of white nuns have asked him to help them build a church.<sup>xii</sup>

This section of the novel represents the coming of age in Not Sidney’s bildungsroman. However, for Not Sidney, his coming of age effectively consists of Not Sidney’s “becoming” Sidney Poitier. Beginning with his arrival in Smuteye, there are numerous references to Not Sidney’s suddenly feeling “considerably older” (180). And, in a classic sign of masculine adulthood, he begins to grow facial hair. As he stops in a Smuteye truck stop washroom to shave, his metamorphosis into Sidney Poitier begins to emerge: “No matter how they [the truckers] scrubbed they looked nothing like Sidney Poitier, but I looked just like him and so they stared. They stared at Sidney Poitier’s face

in the mirror and I stared at it, too.” Not Sidney goes on to note, “The face was smooth, brown, older than I remembered, handsome. The face in the mirror smiled and I had to smile back” (191). Here, as he looks at himself, as Not Sidney looks at Sidney and vice versa, we have a sort of postmodern enactment of Du Boisian second sight or of the black man coming face-to-face with the Fanonian imago of blackness (albeit a hyperreal postmodern imago mediated through popular culture).<sup>xiii</sup> But Not Sidney’s double consciousness here does not haunt him; instead, he and his doppelgänger simply smile at one another.<sup>xiv</sup>

Gradually, however, Poitier begins to overtake Not Sidney, beginning first with Not Sidney’s introduction of himself to Diana Frump, the local diner waitress, as Poitier (182-83), and continuing as he dreams of his own death: “I dreamed I died. I didn’t know how, but I was dead and yet I was staring down at my dead face on the ground. I awoke to see my face in the outside rearview mirror. I looked dead enough” (197). Again, Not Sidney has a sort of out-of-body experience, first in his dream and then through his observation of himself in the mirror, where he sees himself as dead. Following this dream, Not Sidney is arrested by a local sheriff’s deputy for the murder of a man who looks just like him. Though he eventually proves his innocence, the sheriff asks Not Sidney to look at the body of the murdered man, in case he knows him. Not Sidney reluctantly agrees; when he sees the dead man, he observes that “[h]e looked just like me. . . . I was lying in the chest, and yet I wasn’t” (211). This recognition of the man in the morgue as himself leads him, by way of some typical Everettian wordplay, to a recognition of his having, in some sense, “become” Poitier: “I thought that if that body in

the chest was Not Sidney Poitier, then I was not Not Sidney Poitier and that by all I knew of logic and double negatives, I was therefore Sidney Poitier. I was Sidney Poitier” (212).

### **They Call Me Mister Poitier: “Becoming” Sidney Poitier as Performance of Postmodern Blackness**

Thus, after a coming of age that consists essentially of living pieces of the plots of various Poitier films, Not Sidney ultimately seems to accept his having become the actor or at least the fact that his subjectivity and that of the Poitier persona are inextricably intertwined in some way. After helping the local sheriff to solve the murder of the “young man in the freezer who may or may not have been me” (230), Not Sidney flies to Los Angeles to complete the task that initially led him to set out from Atlanta. At the moment early in the novel when Not Sidney begins his journey of self-discovery, Everett writes, “I decided right then to light out for the territory, as it were, to leave my childhood, to abandon what had become my home, my safety, and to discover myself. Most importantly I wanted to find my mother’s grave and put something fitting, perhaps beautiful, on her headstone” (43). When Not Sidney arrives in LA, he is met by a driver with a placard reading “Sidney Poitier” (231), and he joins him. After checking into his hotel, he has the driver, Gilbert, take him to the Los Angeles neighborhood where he grew up before his mother’s death. As he drives past the house that he grew up in, he describes being able to smell his mother’s cookies (233).

While seemingly insignificant, this reference to his mother’s cookies recalls an earlier moment in the text when Not Sidney has a near-death vision when he almost drowns while chained to the white prisoner Patrice. At that moment, he recalls a youthful

conversation with his mother while she bakes cookies. As she puts the cookies into the oven, she talks to Not Sidney about the “changing face of media”:

“News will be the new entertainment,” she said. “Trust me, Not Sidney. It won’t be enough to report it, news will have to be made. It’s going to be a bad thing, but it’s going to be.” She slid the first batch into the oven and closed the door. “That’s where we’ve gone. Everything in this country is entertainment. That’s what you need for stupid people. That’s what children want. Drink your milk.” (56)

Several things are significant about this passage. First, its placement at the beginning of the section of the novel wherein Not Sidney sets off from Atlanta (the point when references to Poitier films begin to suffuse the novel) and the fact that the vision of his mother comes to Not Sidney at a moment when he fears he will die lend it some significance beyond the merely incidental. Second, while the content of what Not Sidney’s mother tells him may seem almost obvious to a twenty-first century reader, it takes on a heightened pertinence in the context of what she is doing while she says it, baking cookies and feeding her son, and also in the context of their status as African Americans. Not Sidney’s mother’s observations about postmodern media, as well as her status as an early investor in Turner Communications (from which Not Sidney acquires his massive wealth), set her up as a provocative foil for stereotypical portrayals of African Americans circulated by the very media she criticizes. She is acutely aware that the media posits African Americans as technologically backward and has often depicted African American women as nurturing (and sometimes sexually licentious) figures.<sup>xv</sup> Yet,

in this passage, she is nurturing her son; what, after all, could be more maternal than baking cookies and instructing one's child to drink his milk? Thus, this passage combines in the figure of Not Sidney's mother a complex understanding of the postmodern mediascape with the most routinized (and stereotypical and mundane) elements of lived experience. What is most significant about the figure of Not Sidney's mother in the novel is not simply that she teaches him about mass-mediated society or that she nurtures him but that she teaches him how this postmodern reality can be (and indeed must be, because like it or not, "it's going to be") navigated and lived by African American subjects.<sup>xvi</sup>

To return to the novel's ending, then, when Not Sidney begins to perform the role of Sidney Poitier in Los Angeles, we see him effectively putting into practice the lessons his mother has taught him. Immediately after he smells his mother's cookies while driving by his childhood home, Not Sidney's chauffeur takes him to the Shrine Auditorium, where he is to accept an award as Poitier. In this scene, Not Sidney is not merely passively allowing others to recognize him as Poitier; instead, he seems to embrace his performance as the actor. As he walks the red carpet, he notes that "People called my name" (233), but of course, the name they presumably call is not Not Sidney. In the novel's final scene, Not Sidney accepts an award for "Most Dignified Figure in American Culture," and the presenters, Elizabeth Taylor and Harry Belafonte, refer to him as "an icon of American character" and "a man that sets the standard." In his acceptance speech, Not Sidney tells the audience that he came to LA "to connect with something lost, to reunite if not with my whole self, then with a piece of it." He goes on to tell them that he has discovered that "this thing," his self, "is nowhere" and that what

he has realized is what his mother's headstone should say and what his own will say: "I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY" (234). With these words, the novel ends.

Of course, it would be easy to read Not Sidney's identification at the end of the novel as an "icon" and a "standard" as a rather cynical comment on the paradox at the heart of postmodern African American subjectivity, and critics, both academic and mainstream, have tended to treat Everett's take on identity in the novel this way. For instance, in a review of the book in *Callaloo*, Carolyn Briones writes that in the novel, "Everett suggests that the media desensitizes us by disconnecting us from reality, changing our understanding and perception of reality, and separating ourselves from ourselves" (554). Similarly, Gregory Leon Miller writes in a review of the novel that it is "a provocative exploration of the unstable nature of African American identity" and that ultimately, "[t]he name 'Not Sidney' suggests an identity with origins in a negative truth—he is viewed not for who he is, but against who he is not." And, in her study of the novel, E. Lâle Demirtürk argues that "Not Sidney's reality is not truly his. . . . All along he is nothing but the white man's project/script, [and he] is always punished for not being Poitier, who stands for the normative white constructions of idealized blackness" (104). Demirtürk also reads Poitier in the novel as representing "White Blackness," while Not Sidney represents "authentic blackness."<sup>xvii</sup> Finally, Demirtürk finds that "Not Sidney's last words, 'I am not myself today,' [open] up a space within which he affirms who he is by refusing to be situated as a stereotype, even if it is positive in the white imaginary" (105). What all of these critics share, it seems to me, is an assumption of the binaries of authenticity as opposed to inauthenticity, reality as opposed to unreality, and self as opposed to other when it comes to identity generally and black identity specifically.

However, throughout the novel and especially in its ending, Everett is elaborating a far more complex take on postmodern black identity than such binary constructions allow.

This in/authenticity dialectic has had particularly pernicious consequences for black subjects in the realm of visual culture. As Fleetwood writes, in the “punitive” sphere of the visual, “the subjugation of blacks continues through the reproduction of denigrating racial stereotypes that allow whites to define themselves through the process of ‘negative differentiation.’” She asserts that this has led to a “fixation on getting images of blacks ‘right’ as a way of countering racist stereotypes” (13). Demirtürk directly invokes the sort of visual-as-punitive framework that Fleetwood describes when she posits that Not Sidney is “punished” throughout the novel for not being Poitier; however, to claim that the figure of Poitier represents a fundamental inauthenticity in the novel against which Not Sidney struggles (whether successfully or not) for authenticity is to posit that Everett is ultimately concerned with getting black identity “right,” as Fleetwood puts it. This interpretation makes sense if Poitier, the actor and the cultural icon of “Most Dignified Figure in American Culture,” represents only a desire on the part of well-meaning mid-twentieth century white liberals (and the black middle class) to correct negative stereotypes of African Americans with positive ones. However, if we read Poitier the actor, as Baldwin did, as a complicated figure attempting to “smuggle” his complex subjectivity into the scripted reality of his films, the picture becomes a little less black-and-white, so to speak. Indeed, it is Poitier’s complexity as subject, not his stasis as image, that drew Everett to him. Everett reveals to Drew Toal that he chose Poitier because, in Toal’s words, “he is such a complicated figure--politically outspoken in public, and eminently ‘safe’ onscreen.”

To accept binary paradigms of racialized identity as inauthentic or authentic leaves little room for nuanced discussion of the ways that life is lived by African American subjects (and the ways it is represented by black artists like Poitier and Everett). It seems to ignore the material reality of identity in the postmodern moment. I maintain that, in accordance with Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality, Everett sees such binaries as ultimately unsustainable in describing the way that postmodern identity is lived. For Baudrillard, the postmodern moment is characterized by a hyperreality in which the simulations of reality that comprise mass-mediated communication have become the dominant mode of representation. Baudrillard sees this hyperreality as a condition in which it is impossible to extricate any concrete notion of reality from the hyperreal "zone of signs, the media and the code" that is the postmodern urban space (*Symbolic* 77). He characterizes this condition as hyperreal rather than unreal in part because he also views the postmodern condition as characterized by what he calls the implosion of the sorts of binaries that would make a concrete distinction between the real and the unreal possible.<sup>xviii</sup>

In *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, Everett adopts a stance toward his protagonist's black subjectivity that dovetails with Baudrillard's observations on the postmodern condition. Rather than countering an unreal stereotype with a real individual subjectivity, Not Sidney must, like his mother, find a way to live in a world in which, however much he might wish it were otherwise, the lived "I," the body that exists and circulates, the body that sees and is seen in the material world is not equivalent to an idealized, internalized notion of "myself." As Moten puts it, "Blackness . . . is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity" (*In* 1); it is in this *break*,



to borrow Moten's term, and in the break between "blackness" as it circulates in a mass-mediated society and blackness as it is lived by individual racialized bodies, that Not Sidney's performance as Poitier can be read as an instance of individual assertion of subjectivity in the face of subjection. Everett's novel ends with a moment of the black body being seen, but rather than being fixed in the punitive, putatively white gaze of the outside world, Not Sidney makes use of his (mis)recognition as Sidney Poitier and the literal stage it offers him to glance out at this world, returning the gaze that would fix him in place; he actively performs a postmodern blackness that rejects (and perhaps sublates) simple oppositions between real and unreal, self and other, and black and white.

It is easy to see why many critics have read the ending of this novel as an assertion of radical individuality against fixed notions of blackness or, as Murray puts it, "the undoing of communal belonging." While I would generally agree with Demirtürk's claim that "[t]he incommensurability between Poitier's image and Not Sidney's embodied particularity opens for Not Sidney a space of particularity beyond identity, in excess of the white supremacist desire to lock blackness into a sanctioned social visibility" (105), the question then becomes, if Not Sidney represents a particularity beyond identity, what if anything remains of a sense of connection to a larger "black" community? Like so many things in the novel, the answer lies in the person of Not Sidney's mother. It is significant, then, that Not Sidney comes to the realization that his mother's headstone should display the same testament to alienation from the notion of a unitary self ("I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY") as his does. In doing so, he comes to see that the creation of identity in and against the gaze of the white other and in and against the spotlight cast by mass-mediated images of African Americans is something that is not

unique to himself or to his generation, though perhaps the pervasiveness and penetration of such images has increased in the context of postmodernity.

Thus, it is by way of his performance as Poitier and his acceptance of his lack of fundamental identity that Not Sidney is able to reconnect himself to his family history and by extension, with a communal, black identity that is materially lived. It may be true, as Yost contends, that Everett's writing "vividly illustrates the disastrous consequences commercial interpretations of such [black] aesthetics have had on the individual artist and on the internal production of identity for the commercially represented community" (1315). However, Everett goes beyond merely observing these disastrous consequences, in the character of Not Sidney Poitier, and suggests ingeniously that a critical component of the true basis for an identity that bridges the gap between paradoxical desires for community and individual difference lies in this performance of black subjectivity against "Black" subjection. Moreover, Everett suggests that the struggle to articulate a subjectivity that exceeds mass-mediated iconography and expectations of blackness is never complete, even while accepting the fact that perhaps there is no unitary "self" outside of the circuits of hyperreal communications. In *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, Everett demonstrates that these implosive binaries between individual and community, interior selfhood and external (hyper)reality, and subjectivity and subjection constitute the discursive field in which postmodern black identity is articulated. And through his protagonist's coming of age (and his effectively "becoming" Poitier), Everett does not merely observe the perils of this postmodern condition, but he also raises the question of whether is it possible to do more than gesture toward the possibility for agencies in the

articulation of a performative self that works within and against the hypervisible and hyper-mediated shadow of “Blackness” writ large.

**“The Body Front and Center”: Meta-Black Renderings of Racial Trauma in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen***

As I have noted, Everett is far from alone in taking this meta- approach to black identity, incorporating the visual with the textual. I want to close with a meditation on a contemporary text that engages with blackness as identity in sometimes similar but simultaneously very different ways. Claudia Rankine’s 2014 book of poetry, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, also invokes the visual, the gaze, and the distorting lens of stereotype, but where Everett focuses on the play to be had in the interstices between the hypervisual simulacra of stereotype and the body, Rankine focuses on the phenomenological, embodied trauma that existing in these breaks exacts. While *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* was written before the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and others, Everett is certainly still very much aware, as I have pointed out, of the terrorizing of black bodies in America, and his focus on the play with stereotypes anticipates meta-black tactics taken up for more somber ends by the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

*Citizen*, in a sense, reads like a companion piece to *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, probing the psychic wounds underlying the playful tricksterdom of Everett’s protagonist. Where Everett’s aesthetic is expressive of the possibilities of performative play within and against mass-mediated iconographies of blackness, Rankine exposes the embodied tolls of living as black in America. Rankine also uses techniques that I would term meta-black, engaging with popular, mediated representations and stereotypes of blackness, but she does so in order to remind her reader of the material consequences to which these

simulations of blackness contribute. While *Citizen* in many ways enacts a darker vision of what living as black in America means in terms of physical and psychological effects, the transmedial, meta-black aesthetic of her work models, like Everett (and the other artists I examine in the dissertation), strategies for not simply managing, but also speaking back to the ways that blackness circulates in the American popular imaginary. For all of their differences, I find it to be productive, especially noting their real-life convergences (the authors share a publisher, and, for a short time anyways, shared an academic department), to put them in conversation to see where they meet. Such a conversation has much to tell us about the contemporary state of this meta-black aesthetic, in all of its possibilities and all of its perils.

Academic criticism of *Citizen* remains in a nascent stage, as the collection was released towards the end of 2014. The book, however, received widespread critical acclaim, both for the timeliness (Dan Chiasson, in his review for *The New Yorker*, called it “an especially vital book for this moment in time”) and accessibility of its subject matter (as Evie Shockley noted, “It is so out of the ordinary for a work of poetry . . . to be the artistic representation of the American zeitgeist that many readers . . . seem barely able to think of the book within that genre”). And indeed, a piece of the collection’s wide appeal and success seems to come from Rankine’s pushing at the boundaries of the genre of poetry, as she incorporates visual images from the realms of popular culture and visual art, and some of the sections of the collection are written as “scripts” for “situation videos,” created in collaboration with Rankine’s husband, the visual artist John Lucas (with some of the videos available for viewing on Rankine’s website). The transmedial composition of the collection certainly played a part in the collection’s critical reception,

as it was nominated for National Book Critics Circle awards in both poetry and criticism, a first.

While the timeliness of the subject matter (Michael Brown was killed as *Citizen* was in press, setting off the uprising in Ferguson, MO, and galvanizing the #BlackLivesMatter movement) may be in part responsible for the collection's attainment of "zeitgeist" status, this multigeneric mode of poetry, with its blending of the textual and the visual, the popular and the literary, is one in which Rankine had been working for some time. In particular, her 2004 collection *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (which also bears the same subtitle, *An American Lyric*, as *Citizen*), makes extensive use of these intertextual aesthetic techniques, interpolating images of television screens into the poetic text, for example. This collection in particular garnered significant attention from literary critics for its formal experimentation. Several different readings have been made of the commentary that Rankine's form makes on twenty-first century subjectivity. Tana Jean Welch, for example, finds that through Rankine, "The reader enters the inner thoughts of an isolated speaker actively trying to make sense of the competing images and registers of language that barrage her daily life in the form of public signage, television, and print articles" (125). Kevin Bell notes that in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, "individual pictures, news 'sound bites,' advertisements and other modes of cultural re-presentation are broken out and isolated from the incessant showering or bombardment of marketed imagery and non-information they help constitute; and then re-situated in distant social contexts" in order to "induce reflection upon the unseen, unheard, unthought dimensions of damage and disfigurement they have already wrought in their aggregate permeation of every possible sphere of individuated life and thinking" (100).

Many critics addressing Rankine's work have additionally noted the significance of the body, and embodied sensory experience to her work.<sup>xix</sup> While these critical accounts do not ignore race as an important concern in Rankine's poetry by any means, they sometimes seem to evince degrees of the critical hesitation to read Rankine's work in the context of a "black aesthetic," preferring to discuss race as an intertwined piece of other, "larger" systems of oppression (capitalism, biopolitics, the "status of the politically situated, socially mediated human subject in contemporary American culture" (Robbins 124)). Clearly, these other systems of oppression are interlocked with race in important ways, but we should at least note the paucity of academic criticism addressing Rankine's place in the context of a black literary aesthetic. Because while analyses such as these certainly don't avoid the subject of race as it functions in Rankine's poetry, they tend not to focus on race as the primary lens through which to view her work.

As opposed to *Citizen, Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is not as consistently occupied with race as its subject matter: the events of 9/11 play a substantial role in the collection, for example, as do issues of disease centered around cancer and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. But the critical hesitation to treat Rankine's earlier poetry using an explicitly African Americanist analytical approach reflects an inability (or unwillingness) to see how "experimental" or "avant-garde" poetry comports with instantiated critical notions of a "black aesthetic." Evie Shockley has recently observed the way that "the discourse around innovative and avant-garde poetry in the U.S. has historically constructed these categories as implicitly 'white'" (11). She compellingly traces the critical uncertainty in approaching African American experimental writers, poets in particular, to "prescriptive" conceptions of a black aesthetic. Shockley argues that this notion of a black literary

aesthetic has been primarily academically institutionalized through the competing analytical frameworks of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker, Jr., and their respective privileging of signifying and the blues as defining characteristics of African American literature. Shockley finds that, ultimately, these “critical approaches necessarily exclude texts by African American writers that are not most productively read through the lens of the blues tradition or the practice of signifying, such that black music and black speech become, once again, the defining rubrics for understanding black literature” (6). Shockley then argues for a more “descriptive” framing of black aesthetics as “a multifarious, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies that African American writers may use to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing,” (9)

Shockley’s conception of the black literary aesthetic(s) as “a mode of writing adopted by African American poets in their efforts to work within, around, or against the constraint of being read and heard as ‘black’” (including how these poets read themselves or might feel an impulse to read themselves) is immensely productive when examining artists like Rankine and Everett; indeed, Shockley cites Rankine at the end of her book as one 21st century artist whom she sees working in this mode (13, 196). When looking at late twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists like Rankine and Everett, the “meta-black” designation contributes to this critical conversation by accounting for the ways that Rankine’s aesthetic works “within, around, and against” blackness as it circulates, as well as the fact that this circulation is to a large extent mediated by the sphere of mass media and information technologies.

I find that Rankine's upsetting of the traditional poetic "I" of lyric poetry is critical to this upending of the "I" of black subjectivity and the "we" of black collective identity. Lyric poetry, in the modern sense, is very much concerned with the "I," the poetic voice, and is usually poetry that speaks to personal experience. Rankine's description of much of her poetry as "Lyric," then, upsets this traditional definition because her poetics are fundamentally trans-subjective. She observes the ways that personal experience and subjectivity are inextricably intertwined with interpersonal experience, and also with the mass-mediated culture circulating around us in the contemporary moment.<sup>xx</sup> While formally putting the lyric "I" and "we" at issue is not a new or distinctively "black" aesthetic practice, as I have pointed out, the disjuncture between the "I" of subjectivity and the "we" of communal identity is especially heightened for subjects visually raced as black, and this disjuncture is a particular focus in Rankine's writing. Thus, she uses this disruption of the traditional lyric "I" in service of expressing the complex, trans-subjective mode in which contemporary blackness is *lived*. Anthony Reed has done some of the most compelling scholarly work on Rankine's use of the lyric "I." Reed addresses the critical uncertainty in treatments of experimental poetry such as Rankine's, arguing that "although critics continue to consider black experimental writing in terms of either race or putatively 'raceless' experimental techniques, the two are mutually constitutive" (3). Reed, focusing on *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, zeroes in on Rankine's disruption of the "I" of lyric poetry as a mode of negotiating the "conflict between the black writer as singular and exemplary" (20). Reed argues that Rankine's "postlyric poetics," "informed by the contradictions of a postsegregation media environment in which increased visibility of black people obscures



the continuation of discriminatory practices, formally put the relationship between an ‘I’ and a ‘we’ at issue” (99).

This conflict between the “I” and the “we,” between subjectivity and collectivity, is a central contradiction that African American artists have struggled with as long as there have been black people writing in America, the same conflict that Everett plays with in his invocation of Poitier in his novel. But as I have pointed out, from the second half of the twentieth century on, the terrain upon which this conflict is waged is that of a mediatized information age, saturated with hypervisible, and so often stereotypical, sounds and images of blackness. Where Everett focuses on the performative play to be found in this terrain, Rankine uses similar techniques to importantly draw attention to the embodied experience of blackness. Even in a world where so much of experience consists of mediated images, sounds, and simulacra, all subjects necessarily phenomenologically live this world through the body. As Charles Johnson observes, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his “A Phenomenology of the Black Body,” the body “is that which reeves the subject to a world, anchors him in history, thus individualizing him, and makes possible perception and ‘meaning’ . . . I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body” (602). And Johnson speaks to the specific condition of living in a body raced as black when he writes, “The experience of the black-as-body becomes, not merely a Self-Other conflict, nor simply Hegel’s torturous Master-Slave dialectic, but a variation on both these conditions, intensified by the particularity of the body’s appearance as black, as ‘stained,’ lacking interiority and, as Fanon writes, as being ‘overdetermined from without’” (605). Rankine’s poetics speak in important ways,

invoking aesthetic techniques that I would classify as meta-black, to this lived experience of being black, particularly as it manifests in the digital age.

Before Rankine's readers even get to the written text of *Citizen*, they are faced with the book's cover, which shows a piece by the visual artist David Hammons, entitled "In The Hood." It depicts a black hood, cut from a sweatshirt, with no head inside. This image opens the text on a note of disembodiment, the hood evoking the specter of decapitation (of an invisible head) and perhaps the hood of an executioner. It seems that the hood is meant to invoke this violence specifically as it is practiced upon black bodies as well, but it does so in relation to blackness as cultural phenomenon (via the hip hop-inflected style of the hoodie). Emphasizing the point is the blackness of the hood itself, thrown against a white background. This resonates, of course, with Zora Neale Hurston's remark, invoked repeatedly by Rankine in the written text (in meta-fashion, via reference to an art piece by black visual artist Glenn Ligon), "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." Hammons' piece certainly had these resonances when it was first created in 1993, but Rankine's employment of it in this post-Trayvon Martin moment, when the hoodie has been employed by protestors and activists (in a meta-manner, as I have observed), to mobilize action around the issue of violence, state-sanctioned and otherwise, against black people in America.

Starting, then, from this instance of visual disembodiment, and this large-scale, oblique reference to high-profile instances of spectacular violence, the written text opens with personal meditations on quotidian instances of racism. Discussing an instance in which "a close friend who early in your friendship, when distracted, would call you by the name of her black housekeeper" (7), Rankine writes that "Certain moments send

adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs” (7). She goes on to write, in a passage where it is unclear if she is referring to this same incident, or just a general feeling of physical sickness, “An unsettled feeling keeps the body front and center” (8).

These descriptions of everyday sorts of “microaggressions” and their somatic impacts are scattered throughout the book, but one of the more poignant comes when Rankine recounts a colleague telling her that his dean is making him hire a person of color. Afterwards, wondering to herself why he would feel comfortable telling her this, she describes sitting alone in her driveway, thinking “You fear the night is being locked in and coded on a cellular level and want time to function as a power wash” (11). She goes on to write that, “a friend once told you there exists the medical term--John Henryism--for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism” (11). Rankine's invocation of the figure of John Henry here is layered. The origins of the folkloric figure of John Henry, an African American man who worked himself to death in a duel of man vs. machine against a steam-powered hammer, are debated, but what is undebatable is the fact that he has become a larger than life cultural icon of black masculine physicality. The iconography represented by Henry has been invoked endlessly in song and popular culture, sometimes as a symbol of racial pride and solidarity, sometimes co-opted as a symbol of the triumph of man over machine, and sometimes as a symbol of the tragedy of the exploitation of black labor.

By using a medical term to describe bodily stresses imparted by racism, Rankine suggests that Henry's fight against the machine might be conceived as a battle against the notions of blackness foisted upon black subjects by society. In the twenty-first century, these notions are often delivered by machines of mass communication.<sup>xxi</sup> Rankine goes

on to write that in this new duel, black people “achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure,” and notes that “Sherman James, the researcher who came up with the term, claimed the physiological costs were high” (11). This battle of black people against “blackness” can be seen as a continuation of Du Bois’s double consciousness, but in invoking the cultural icon of John Henry to describe it, Rankine not only speaks to the physical effects of this phenomenon, but also figures the notions of black identity against which black subjects must express themselves as mass cultural. Even when they occur in intimate moments such as the ones Rankine describes, she makes a powerful connection between the interpersonal and a larger cultural “technology” of racism.

Of course, Rankine’s use of “you” invites the facile reading of attributing her second person “you” to the author, and but I find that that the invitation to read in this way is intentional. In putting experiences that seem so intimately described, embodied, and also in keeping with what you might know about Rankine (she is an academic, lives a middle- to upper-class existence, is a tennis player and fan), she causes the reader to assume that they are personal recollections. In this context, the “you” serves to underline the alienating effect of this particular experience upon the subject raced as black. And Rankine also expresses the difficulty of expressing a subjective “I” in the context of an externally imposed “you” of blackness writ large, and also the various “we”s, including the African American collectivity, who may wish to interpellate the subject (or whom the subject may wish to interpellate with). This “you” can be read as the “postlyric” voice described by Reed, “a voice suspended between ‘I’ and ‘we,’ centered and diffuse at once” (97).

This “you” can also be productively read in other ways, and I would claim that Rankine intentionally leaves this possibility for multiple readings open.<sup>xxii</sup> She moves between the “I,” the “you,” and the “we,” in ways that allow her to affectively speak to different audiences. To a black reader, the “you” could function as a gesture of inclusion, forming a “we” by inviting identification with shared experiences and sensations that often go unspoken. By speaking to and for this “you,” Rankine creates a “we.” To nonblack readers, this “you” could be read as simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, at once inviting the reader into the bodily experience of living as black, even as the second person address simultaneously excludes and perhaps even accuses. This accusatory tone becomes the most pronounced at the end of the first section of the collection, in which a therapist who specializes in trauma counseling sees Rankine’s “you” in her yard and directs her to leave. The narrator, it turns out, has an appointment, and the section ends with the therapist’s words (or are they partly the thoughts of the narrator as well?) “I am so sorry, so, so sorry.” In this invocation of the first person, notably punctuated without quotation marks, the white reader is left with a display, made more striking by the fact that s/he is being placed in the body of the racialized other, of the inefficacy of white guilt at repairing racial trauma. The section ends with a visual, a sculpture by a white artist, Kate Clark, of a brown human face taxidermically sewn onto the body of a baby caribou. The sculpture has the effect of furthering this theme of disembodiment, emphasizing how, under the gaze of the white racial imagination, the black “you” can be made to feel less than human, more of an “it” than an “I.”

While the “you” of the narrator is preserved, the collection’s second section shifts perspective somewhat, focusing on two figures of popular culture, a “he” and a “she,”

YouTube artist Hennessy Youngman, and tennis player Serena Williams. The larger theme of the chapter is black anger, the type of anger generated by the sorts of microaggressions documented in the opening section, and the productive or counterproductive uses to which it can be put. The sections wherein Rankine writes about Youngman, a black artist who posts tutorials on “contemporary art issues” on YouTube in a series called *Art Thoughtz* (23). Rankine meditates on Youngman’s idea that in order to be a successful black artist in contemporary America, raced individuals may cultivate and make use of what Rankine calls a “sellable anger” (24), mobilizing the stereotypes of angry black men and women for material gain. In many ways, this sort of use of anger is in keeping with the kind of performative meta-black aesthetic I have noted in Everett and others. However, Rankine, in her focus on the quotidian, subtly embodied effects of racism, expresses doubts about the effectiveness of such a strategy: “The commodified anger his video advocates rests lightly on the surface for spectacle’s sake. It can be played like the race card and is tied solely to the performance of blackness and not to the emotional state of particular individuals in particular situations” (23). Rankine’s second-person narrator wonders to herself if the real shortcoming of this sort of approach is that it neglects to address a more “real anger”: “the anger built up through experience and the quotidian struggles against dehumanization every black or brown person lives simply because of skin color” (24).

While Rankine’s narrator observes what Youngman’s approach lacks, she does not seem to reject it outright, and constantly questions her own thoughts about the nature of “real” black anger: “You begin to think, maybe erroneously, that this other kind of anger is really a type of knowledge” (24). She concludes that while this knowledge may

lead the black subject to respond to erasure by “asserting presence,” this assertion may lead only to “a disappointment in the sense that no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived” (24). This matter of perception is at the heart of what is difficult about articulating a nuanced black subjectivity in a world wherein so many competing sounds and images of blackness circulate in the realm of mass mediated culture, forming the crux of the meta-black dilemma. Rankine seems ultimately uncertain as to whether a solution might be found in the sorts of performative play against stereotypes advocated by Youngman, or in an uncompromising focus on exposing the material, bodily costs of racism. She writes, “Recognition of this lack might break you apart. Or recognition might illuminate the erasure the attempted erasure triggers. Whether such discerning creates a healthier, if more isolated self, you can’t know” (24).<sup>xxiii</sup> This questioning of the value of recognition again speaks to Rankine’s theme of disembodiment (it “might break you apart”), but there is some hope that it may “illuminate,” though ultimately “you can’t know.”

Rankine’s use of “recognition” here is significant, as it invokes contemporary discourses around recognition theory (wherein oppressed groups struggle for appropriate social recognition). Building from Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, current theorists have invoked recognition as a means of framing how, as Charles Taylor puts it in his pivotal essay “The Politics of Recognition,” “a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves” (25). Recently, however, critics have pointed to flaws in recognition theory’s dissolution of difference across lines such as racial identity. Patchen Markell provides a particularly useful critique, arguing for a

“politics of acknowledgment” in place of recognition, finding that “the ideal of mutual recognition, while appealing, is also impossible, even incoherent” (16). Markell’s acknowledgment, then, is premised on “accepting that the existence of other . . . makes unpredictability and lack of mastery into unavoidable conditions of human agency” (157). Similarly, Iris Marion Young, in arguing for a “communicative” form of democracy, sums up the way that theories of democracy based in recognition can level difference: “If we are all really looking for what we have in common . . . then we are not really transforming our point of view. We only come to see ourselves mirrored in others” (127). Young, in her normative ideal, would rather see difference preserved in the process of communication, rather than merely identifying with one another. It is this impossibility or incoherence of undifferentiated recognition, and this unpredictability in the realm of embodied interpersonal relations and in the realm of mediated representations of “blackness,” which Rankine expresses in her work.

Indeed, the struggle for recognition that Rankine turns to, then, and which the text of *Citizen* itself speaks to in its transtextual, transmedial, and trans-subjective form, is not primarily the struggle for appropriate recognition from the nation-state or from the white other. Instead, Rankine articulates the struggle of the embodied black individual against the body of Blackness as it circulates in the postmodern mediascape. The “you” that Rankine employs throughout is ingenious in this sense, as it denies (white) readers the option of recognizing this subjectivity or not; they are subsumed, embodied, by it. This dialectic described by Rankine, like Hegel’s original Master-Slave dialectic that recognition theory is premised upon, is ultimately an irresolvable one, but Rankine suggests that it is in the struggle between the two poles, between embodied and mediated



blackness, the black and the “Black,” and between surface-level performative play and material trauma, that postmodern black subjectivity is forged. Given this dialectical framework, then, the metaphor of the back-and-forth of the tennis match that runs throughout *Citizen*, and specifically the discussion of Serena Williams that follows her meditations on Youngman, seem fitting.

Rankine’s discussion of Williams pivots on this split between Williams as embodied black woman and larger-than-life cultural figure, and her attempts to articulate a “real” anger somewhere in between the two. Rankine writes that, “For years you attribute to Serena Williams a kind of resilience appropriate only for those who exist in celluloid” (26). Here we have Serena Williams the cultural icon existing on the surface level of the screen, and also the stereotype of “strong black womanhood” discussed by Harris-Perry and others. And yet, Rankine later returns us to the material reality of Williams as embodied when she writes “Yes, and the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight. The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness” (28). In this figuration, to work (perhaps in a slightly different way) with Rankine’s tennis metaphor, the body as “threshold” is like the net, caught between the individual’s “pure” consciousness and the outside world, with all of its “objectionable calls” vis-à-vis blackness and race.

For Rankine, Serena on the tennis court herself becomes a metaphor for the struggle between these opposing poles, as she writes “From the start many made it clear Serena would have done better struggling to survive in the two-dimensionality of a Millet painting, rather than on their tennis court--better to put all that strength to work in their fantasy of her working the land, rather than be caught up in the turbulence of our ancient

dramas, like a ship fighting a storm in a Turner seascape” (26). It is provocative that she describes the unreal, two-dimensional *Serena* by invoking 19th century French painter Jean-François Millet, who is generally considered part of the Realist movement in art. But, of course, like so many “realists,” Millet’s most famous paintings were of peasant farmers, paintings that could be read as fetishizing and romanticizing the farmers in ways similar to the ways the African American “folk” has been fetishized and romanticized (often as “American” peasantry). The specific “Turner seascape” to which Rankine refers is J.M.W. Turner’s 1840 painting, entitled *The Slave Ship*. At first glance, the painting appears to be a picturesque scene of a ship sailing into the sunset. Upon closer inspection, however, we can see drowning black limbs in chains extending from the water. Turner, motivated by his involvement with the abolitionist cause, was reportedly inspired to paint *The Slave Ship* upon reading about a real-life incident wherein the crew of a slave ship caught in a storm threw the slaves they were carrying overboard so as to collect on their insurance policies. Turner, as opposed to Millet, is most often classed as a Romantic painter, and so by juxtaposing the two artists in this way, Rankine exposes the way that in the contemporary American moment, and perhaps all along, the so-called “real” is founded on a romanticization and exploitation of the racialized other, while the “romantic” is underpinned by material human tragedy.

However, in her invocation of the Turner painting as it relates to Williams, Rankine places Williams in the symbolic place of the “ship fighting a storm,” “caught up in the turbulence of our ancient dramas.” The reality behind this conceit, as Rankine well knows (she returns to this painting specifically at the close of *Citizen*), is that Turner’s painting is not merely a “seascape,” and it is not merely about a “ship fighting a storm.”

Similarly, Rankine poses Williams' struggle as more than a tennis match, and more even than a black tennis player struggling for recognition in a traditionally white space. It is the struggle of an embodied black individual to bridge the gap between public and private selves, between consciousness and a world that comes to consciousness of blackness only in very specific and fragmented ways. As for Williams' management of this situation, towards the end of the section, Rankine's narrator wonders if Williams has come across any of Youngman's videos, in which he advises black artists that "the less that is communicated the better. Be ambiguous" (35). Rankine ultimately questions the value of this ambiguity, however, writing that "This type of ambiguity could also be diagnosed as dissociation and would support Serena's claim that she has had to split herself off from herself and create different personae" (35-36).

In Rankine's poetic vision in *Citizen*, then, Serena Williams is not presented as a triumphant model for black subjectivity. In fact, Rankine's depiction of her stands in stark contrast to Williams' own aforementioned triumphant embrace of the ambiguity of her public persona, her blackness, and her black female sexuality in her appearance in Beyonce's *Lemonade*, dancing provocatively to the defiantly ambiguous lyrics "Sorry, I'm not sorry." Viewing *Citizen* from a bird's-eye-view, meta-textual level, however, we might say that Williams exists in the text as one of many fragments of blackness as it circulates in the popular imaginary that Rankine uses to paint her trans-subjective portrait of contemporary black subjectivity. For Rankine's narrator, identifying with Williams abstains from either adulation or pity. Williams the cultural figure actually becomes a part of the body of the expansive you-I-we lyric voice of the narrator.

This conception of black subjectivity and poetic voice is further underlined in the “situation video” sections of *Citizen*. For instance, in the section entitled “Stop and Frisk,” Rankine shows how the images and the histories of race are embodied by contemporary black subjects in the line, repeated throughout the section “And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description” (105). This section is followed by an untitled visual art piece by Glenn Ligon, a grainy, blurred, and damaged black-and-white photograph showing what appears to be a crowd of black men watching a speech or something of the like--but it is hard to tell, because while the first row or two of black male faces are barely discernible, the rest fade into gray indeterminacy.

Like most good poets and artists, Rankine is loath to draw any pedantic conclusions in her work, and while the overwhelming tone of the collection is certainly far from triumphant, she seems to steer clear of descending entirely into tragedy. That is to say, despite her skepticism towards Youngman and Williams’ ambiguity, she herself remains ambiguous. She writes, blurring her pronouns to accentuate the trans-subjective lyric voice she enacts, “And yes, I want to interrupt to tell him her us you me I don’t know how to end what doesn’t have an ending” (159). But she does end the collection by recounting to an intimate partner (he is described as “wrapping his arms around me”) a microaggressive interaction she had with a woman on the way to her tennis match. After the story, the partner asks, “Did you win?”, and she responds, “It wasn’t a match. It was a lesson” (159). And ultimately, this is as much resolution as Rankine is willing to offer to her own version of the Master-Slave dialectic, here figured in the dialectics of consciousness-world, blackness-Blackness, embodiment-fragmentation. Her poetry, and

her lyric voice that attempts to exist within the “I,” the “you,” and the “we,” stands as an object lesson, not in how the age-old problem of racism in America might be solved, but in how an embodied black subjectivity might be expressed amidst the historical-cultural baggage surrounding the signifier “Blackness,” a (very provisional) answer to the question she poses: “How to care for the injured body, / the kind of body that can’t hold / the content it is living?” (143).

Rankine closes *Citizen* with an image of Turner’s painting *The Slave Ship*, accompanied on the following page by a close-up from the painting of a black leg, chained, emerging from the water, being attacked by fish and birds. It is a scene of unimaginable horror, to be certain, a scene of trauma and certain death. But in Rankine’s appropriation of the image, it is also a scene of black struggle, the black subject fighting for life. In a section towards the end of the collection Rankine writes “A body in the world drowns in it-- / Hey you-- / All our fevered history won’t instill insight, / won’t turn a body conscious, / won’t make that look / in the eyes say yes, though there is nothing / to solve / even as each moment is an answer” (142). It is in this space, the address to (and incorporation of) “you,” in the struggle to live and find insight and consciousness somewhere between the accumulated history and the sensate body, that *Citizen*, in a mode that I think could be productively classed as meta-black along with the more playful works of authors like Everett, ambiguously makes its home.

This final visual is also of course a scene of fragmentation of the body, as we see only the black leg emerging from the sea, and indeed this image emphasizes the fact that Rankine’s description of embodied black experience is at many points a description of the experience of disembodiment, as the black body negotiates with the body of cultural

discourse around “Blackness” circulating in the cultural imaginary. Moreover, Rankine’s focus on disembodiment responds to the way that some critics de-racinate or disembody the “body” they discuss vis-à-vis her texts. It would be difficult to argue that *Citizen* shows very much “hope” for resistance to be found in these negotiations; however, like many of the other artists I have examined herein, perhaps looking for “resistance,” or at least triumphal resistance is not exactly the point.

In this sense, Rankine and Everett may also provide us with some common ground between so-called “Black Optimists” like Moten who discuss the possibilities for resistance to be found in performative blackness, and “Afro-Pessimists” like Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, and others, who argue for the persistence of a “social death” forged in slavery. Theorist R.L. usefully summarizes the Afro-Pessimist position vis à vis black subjectivity: “the black subject is exiled from the *human relation*, which is predicated on social recognition, volition, subjecthood, and the valuation of life itself. Thus black existence is marked as an ontological *absence*, posited as sentient object and devoid of any positive relationality.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Recent scholarship, however, has troubled both sides of this resistance-social death dichotomy in African American studies. Vincent Brown writes, for example, that studies of ante- and postbellum black life “often divide between works that emphasize the overwhelming power of the institution and scholarship that focuses on the resistant efforts of the enslaved. . . . It might even be said that these kinds of studies form different and opposing genres--hopeful stories of heroic subalterns versus anatomies of doom--that compete for ascendance” (1235).

Indeed, on their surfaces, it might be easy to read Everett’s novel as one of these “hopeful stories” and Rankine’s collection as an “anatomy of doom.” But this is part of

the reason that I have chosen them as dual examples of a contemporary meta-black literary aesthetic. Because both texts, in their own distinct ways, give us representations of contemporary black existence that are more complex than this resistance-social death dichotomy would imply. While Everett's text tends more towards the performative, and Rankine's focuses more on embodied trauma, both are fundamentally concerned with how black identity is *lived* in a postmodern mediascape. In criticizing the ways that the term "agency" is commonly deployed in scholarly studies of oppressed populations, Brown notes the ways that both studies emphasizing agency and those focusing on social death miss the complexity of lived experience, the fact that for slaves, "They had to make the threat of social chaos meaningful" (1245). And I think that this might be an apt description of the mode of contemporary black existence that both Everett and Rankine describe in their respective texts. Both authors give us black subjectivities struggling to make meaning out of this social chaos, a chaos which in the twenty-first, is increasingly comprised of mass-mediated sounds and images, and both authors make use of fragments of blackness as it circulates in this popular imaginary to elaborate a meta- mode of contemporary black subjectivity, blackness as it is *lived*, somewhere in between an abstract, idealized notion of performative agency and the ontological emptiness of social death.

### Notes

<sup>i</sup> For instance, about *Erasure* (2001), Everett's scathing takedown of the publishing industry's treatment of black culture, Margaret Russett writes that "Everett unhinges 'black' subject matter from a lingering stereotype of 'black' style, while challenging the assumption that a single or consensual African-American Experience exists to be represented" (360). Brian Yost argues similarly that rather than depicting any sort of unitary form of blackness, Everett "re-evaluates expression at the individual level, offering instead a human identity composed of a non-reducible array of significant experiences and influences" (1325). A defiant individualism in Everett's work puts him in the context of a postmodernist black literary aesthetic, described by Rolland Murray, in

his particularly insightful essay on the aesthetics of Paul Beatty and Darius James, which stages “the undoing of communal belonging as a potentially generative occasion” (215).

<sup>ii</sup> I invoke Samuel R. Delany here because I think that his description of racism as a “socio-visual system” (393) is particularly apt but also because, like Percival Everett, he is an eclectic African American writer with a long history of struggling against an industry that insists on viewing him as a black science fiction writer rather than simply a science fiction writer, even as he has been forced to accept and attempt to work from within a system wherein “[n]o one . . . will ever look at you, read a word you write, or consider you in any situation, no matter whether the roof is falling in or the money is pouring in, without saying to him- or herself (whether in an attempt to count it or to discount it), ‘Negro . . .’ The racial situation, permeable as it might sometimes seem (and it is, yes, highly permeable), is nevertheless your total surround” (391).

<sup>iii</sup> Of course, in terms of theorizing performative blackness and specifically techno-performative blackness, I am also highly indebted to the work of Ralph Ellison and the lesson regarding black identity that his unnamed protagonist learns from the elusive Rinehart, the “Spiritual Technologist” (495): “His world was possibility and he knew it. . . The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home” (498).

<sup>iv</sup> I use W. E. B. Du Bois’s term “second-sight” here (10), an element of his more commonly recognized notion of double consciousness, because it emphasizes the visual (and hypervisible) aspect of race and racial identification. It seems to me that the realm of the visual is critical to Everett’s postmodern play with and against racializing codes and to why he chooses to structure his novel around the film star Sidney Poitier as opposed to, say, a black musician.

<sup>v</sup> Fleetwood observes that “[b]lackness and black life become intelligible and valued, as well as consumable and disposable, through racial discourse. . . . Through its circulation, blackness attaches to bodies and narratives coded as such but it always exceeds these attachments” (6).

<sup>vi</sup> I am working here from Fleetwood’s definition of hypervisibility as “an interventionist term [used] to describe processes that produce the overrepresentation of certain images of blacks and the visual currency of these images in public culture” (16).

<sup>vii</sup> Of course, both Fred Moten and Fleetwood build their notions of performative blackness on earlier discussions of performativity generally. J. L. Austin’s concept of the performative utterance, wherein an utterance does not simply describe reality but rather plays a part in shaping and changing the reality it describes (4-7), has been appropriated by myriad subsequent theorists. The concept has been put to particularly notable use by gender theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler to describe the ways that individual gender identities are negotiated and performed within the context of existing gender norms. Theorists of performative blackness such as Moten and Fleetwood describe the performative nature of black identity in a similar vein, then, with their particular focus (and Everett’s focus in his novel) on the realm of the gaze and vision arising from the primarily visual nature of racial identification in the US. This essay aims to build on these approaches and more fully incorporate the role that mass-mediated iconographies and stereotypes of blackness play in this performance of black identity.



<sup>viii</sup> In Poitier's emergence as a mainstream Hollywood superstar, he also moved away from earlier left-wing political associations. As Aram Goudsouzian notes, "In the early 1950s, Poitier traveled in America's most radical social circles," and "lent his talents to 'subversive' circles" (89-90). Poitier gradually backed away from these associations as his career picked up in the mid-1950s.

<sup>ix</sup> This list is likely not comprehensive. E. Lâle Demirtürk also notes a reference to the Poitier-directed film *Stir Crazy* (1980) (94), and it is quite possible, even probable, that there are other subtle references to Poitier's filmic career that critics have not yet discovered.

<sup>x</sup> I draw here, of course, on any number of whiteness studies scholars (and their often under-recognized predecessors, including Du Bois and James Baldwin) who draw attention to whiteness' status as an unmarked norm against which difference is measured; yet given this essay's focus on visual and filmic culture, Richard Dyer's famous observation about how, in American and British film, "white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular" seems especially relevant (141).

<sup>xi</sup> This trope of black characters sacrificing themselves for white characters in the interest of racial harmony has been a persistent one in Hollywood film, as Edward Guerrero articulates. Guerrero traces this black sacrifice through a number of black-white buddy films, from *The Defiant Ones* to Eddie Murphy's *48 Hrs.* (1982), observing that "the idea of racial cooperation is limited by Hollywood's eradication of the black point of view in these narratives; in all these films, the black makes a sacrifice to solve problems the white man defines" (131).

<sup>xii</sup> Like almost any name in Everett's work, the name Smuteye for this backwards Southern town has multiple possible resonances. The name could refer to a black eye, thus invoking anti-black violence, or perhaps to the stereotyping and degrading white gaze. Additionally, the name Smuteye could be a clever play on Not Sidney's black subjectivity (the black "I").

<sup>xiii</sup> Frantz Fanon himself uses this term in reference to popular culture, writing in his analysis of representations of black subjects in film that "European culture has an imago of the Negro which is responsible for all the conflicts that may arise" and that "on the screen the Negro faithfully reproduces that imago" (169). It makes additional sense to invoke Fanon here, as Not Sidney literally looks at himself in the mirror; Fanon's use of the term imago draws from Jacques Lacan's use of the Jungian psychoanalytical term to explain the connection made by the infant in the mirror stage between the image he sees and himself.

<sup>xiv</sup> Given Everett's propensity for incorporating high theory into his work, he may also be signifying on the theoretical concept of the palimpsest. An archeological term to describe multilayered written texts where earlier records could be revealed beneath the more recent inscriptions, the concept gets picked up by Thomas De Quincey in the nineteenth century and by subsequent contemporary thinkers such as Sarah Dillon to describe figuratively the way that different written texts influence, infiltrate, and interpenetrate one another. This concept has particular relevance to the way that Poitier here figures Not Sidney's body as just such a multilayered text, interwoven with the mass-mediated texts of blackness represented by Poitier the actor. As Not Sidney shaves his face, the text of

Poitier the actor and the influence of all the iconography of blackness that he represents on Not Sidney's individual subjectivity is revealed.

<sup>xv</sup> African American film scholars, particularly Donald Bogle and Guerrero, have outlined the prevalence of the mammy stereotype in filmic representations of African American women. As Guerrero writes, "Working her way into all genres, the mammy became a dominant, if not the dominant, representation of black women on the screen" (16). Alternately a highly sexualized, buffoonish, or nurturing figure, Baldwin traces these stereotypical representations of black women through American culture in "The Devil Finds Work" (1976) to the Poitier film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Baldwin writes, "The inclusion of this figure is absolutely obligatory--compulsive--no matter what the film imagines itself to be saying by this inclusion. How many times have we seen her! She is Dilsey, she is Mammy, in *Gone With the Wind*, and in *Imitation of Life*, and *The Member of the Wedding*--mother of sorrows, whore and saint" (533).

<sup>xvi</sup> The relentlessly intertextual Everett may also in this cookie scene be invoking Marcel Proust's famous madeleine from the first volume of his seven-part novel, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-27). In this novel, Proust's narrator bites into a madeleine cookie as an adult, which reminds him of eating a madeleine as a child, and subsequently launches an involuntary flood of memories from his childhood, all of which lead him to gain a macroscopic perspective on his life. For Not Sidney, the smell of baking cookies sets off a similar set of involuntary memories, with this seemingly minute detail perhaps lending him some sense of the uniqueness of his own (and his mother's) individual subjectivity outside of mass-mediated images of what blackness is or should be. This subtle moment of literary intertextuality in Everett's novel should serve, in consideration of Everett not only as novelist but as literary theorist and scholar, to remind us of the rewards to be reaped when we refuse to view his oeuvre solely through the lens of African American literary criticism and theory.

<sup>xvii</sup> Demirtürk borrows the term *White Blackness* from Benjamin R. Bates's analysis of the inversive performance of race in the film *White Man's Burden* (1995) (Bates 208). Thus, Demirtürk seems to read Poitier as icon as inversively performing a version of black identity designed to meet white approval.

<sup>xviii</sup> The prefix hyper-, deriving from Greek, means "over, beyond, or above" ("Hyper-"), suggesting the manner in which Jean Baudrillard wished to express the way that mass-mediated simulation effectively transcends any concrete distinctions between the real and unreal. In Baudrillard's figuration, then, the hyperreal, for all intents and purposes, becomes more real than the real.

<sup>xix</sup> For example, Angela Hume writes, "I read *Citizen* as the latest installment of Rankine's twenty-year meditation on the 'wasting body'--a figure that, in Rankine's poetry, accounts for how certain bodies are attenuated or made sick under capitalism and the state, while simultaneously being regarded as surplus by these same structures" (79). Similarly, Amy Moorman Robbins writes, in an analysis of the hybrid poetics of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, "I want to suggest that Rankine uses the body to register the effects of a fundamentally asocial, antihumanist American culture" (126).

<sup>xx</sup> Further, in its classical Greek context, lyric poetry was called such because of its musical accompaniment by a lyre. While Rankine's poems, in their fusion of prose and

poetry, might not be described as being especially “musical,” her designation of her work as “Lyric” is of interest in light of my foregoing discussion of Du Bois and Johnson’s exploration of music and the aural as a discursive space with potential for bridging the “I” of individual subjectivity with the “we” of communal blackness. Rankine’s transmedial poetics, incorporating the aural and the visual, are very much concerned with the location of a similar discursive space.

<sup>xxi</sup> Colson Whitehead plays in similar ways with the Henry figure’s contemporary cultural resonances in his 2001 novel *John Henry Days*, which centers on a black freelance journalist protagonist sent to West Virginia to write a story on a “John Henry Day” festival to mark the occasion of the release of a John Henry postage stamp.

<sup>xxii</sup> Poet Erica Hunt does a convincing reading of Rankine’s use of pronouns in *Citizen*, finding that the shifting “you” helps “The poems embody a pitch-perfect demonstration of the ‘problem’ of black bodies in American social spaces, a house of mirrors and dislocations, erasures and psychic abysses that must be negotiated by black people” (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/all-about-you/>).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Everett is also concerned in his work with this subject of erasure. His novel *Erasure*, in fact, explores the confining nature of a “sellable” blackness, similar to that expressed by Youngman, within the context of the 1990s publishing industry.

<sup>xxiv</sup> It should be noted that many thinkers labeled as “Afro-Pessimist” might consider the term to be a misnomer, and might claim that there is in fact a radical optimism in their thinking: blackness as identity category must be abolished because it was created for purposes at odds with black humanity and liberation.

## CONCLUSION

*"Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness.'"*

In the preceding pages, I have made the case for a through-line in 20th and 21st century African American literary and cultural expression, which I have termed a meta-black aesthetic. Working from the epistemological sense of the prefix "meta-" as indicating discourse that takes its own category as its subject, I find that, in a sense, the authors and artists I have analyzed herein take up the subject of, as the preacher in Ellison's prologue puts it, the "Blackness of Blackness." Black people in America have, of course, engaged in discourse about their racial situation, their "Blackness," since they were first forcefully brought here and compelled to try to understand and overcome the condition of being enslaved, brutalized, and discriminated against based on the color of their skin. A piece of what takes some of these artistic expressions around the topic of blackness "meta-" in the 20th and 21st centuries, however, is the rise of the "age of mechanical reproduction," and the rapid expansion of mass-mediated communication technologies. From phonograph to mp3 player, newsreel to home television set, telegraph to cell phone, typewriter to tablet, these technologies have significantly shaped and informed how subjects in America and internationally interact with others, and indeed, how we view ourselves, and this has special relevance for subjects raced as black, as representations of blackness, often stereotypical and derogatory, circulate freely via these technologies.

Thus, in choosing the texts and authors that I have examined herein, I aim to interrogate how such shifts in communication and technologies change how blackness as identity is perceived and experienced. That is, what does it mean to see blackness, or to

hear it, or to experience it as being seen and heard by others, and how have these experiences changed over time? And finally, I have examined how this experience of blackness in 20th/21st century America is necessarily mediated through the sediment of popular cultural stereotypes, and how raced subjects in America work with and against these stereotypes to articulate their identities. Given the wide-reaching effects of these changes, I could have perhaps chosen almost any African American authors or artists of the 20th and 21st centuries and traced in some way the impact of these shifts on his/her work. However, from Du Bois's and Johnson's engagements with commercial and popular music and the phono/graphic dichotomy between the written and the oral, to Ellison's invocation of the iconic figure of Louis Armstrong, to the concern among contemporary black artists and authors like Rankine and Everett with articulating a mode of living as black in a world where such identities are necessarily both solid and simulated, I have tried to choose some representative texts that explicitly engage with the "Blackness of Blackness." These artists take up the contemporary contradictions inherent in a black identity that is phenomenologically embodied and also entwined with the simulated "body" of cultural discourse around "Blackness," and among their other artistic achievements, model modes of living in conversation with this mass-mediated body.

Throughout the dissertation, I have observed how these cultural producers navigate a number of seeming contradictions of (post)modern blackness, among them the divide between the written and oral, the visual and the aural, the embodied and the ephemeral, the solid and the simulated, and the individual and community. These are all dichotomies that become increasingly unsustainable in a mass-mediated age, binaries that "implode," as Baudrillard would have it. And all of the black cultural producers I have

examined herein employ their own strategies to engage these contradictions, using a “meta-” engagement with circulating “blackness” as a tool for living. One other binary, which I perhaps have not engaged with as explicitly, but which is fundamental to contemporary discourse around the viability and the “useability” of blackness as category of identity in the post-Civil Rights era, is the divide between the history and the future of blackness. That is, a primary question that vexes so many contemporary black artists and thinkers is, how to engage with the often painful history of blackness in America, but in such a way that allows for a path forward, that effects material change in the present and works towards a more hopeful future? This sort of questioning animates so many of the discussions I have interrogated here--conversations between Black Optimists and Afro-Pessimists, and post-racial/post-identity politics claims, for example--but also many others I have not, including ongoing artistic and intellectual work around Afrofuturism and the neo-slave narrative. As a way of concluding this dissertation and of looking forward to questions still to be asked, I will structure what follows around this past-future dichotomy, taking a very recent literary text, Colson Whitehead’s 2016 neo-slave narrative *The Underground Railroad*, as an example of a “meta-” mode of engaging with the past, and also looking towards the future, to discuss the continuing relevance of racial identity in an age of “configurable culture,” where some might make the case that all identities have in a sense gone “meta-.”

### **Life After Social Death: Towards a Useable Black Past**

The term “Neo-Slave Narrative” was coined by Bernard Bell in his 1987 book *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition*, to describe a renewed interest in the slave

narrative form among African American authors of the 1960s and 70s. There has since been a good deal of critical work on neo-slave narratives,<sup>i</sup> and work that makes further distinctions within the genre to account for “postmodern neo-slave narratives” or just “post-neo-slave narratives” that adopt aspects of the slave narrative while simultaneously eschewing the realism and strict historicity that was so critical to the original form.<sup>ii</sup>

A recent example of such a “postmodern neo-slave narrative” (though I would argue that it could also be classed as a “meta-slave narrative”) is Colson Whitehead’s 2016 *The Underground Railroad*. The novel in many ways reads like a straightforward slave narrative, describing the slave protagonist Cora’s hard-fought journey from slavery to freedom. However, there are twists—for one, the Underground Railroad, rather than a secret network of safe houses and hiding places, is here an actual underground railroad, complete with conductors and stations. Like the real Underground Railroad, the railroad in Whitehead’s novel lacks any central organization, and the slaves (and even the conductors) often do not seem to know exactly where they are headed, except that they are moving towards freedom. There are other “tweaks” that Whitehead makes to the history of slavery as well, such as skyscrapers, a seemingly progressive South Carolina that turns out to be part of a eugenics-inspired forced sterilization program, a “living history museum” where Cora plays an African tribeswoman for tourists, and a North Carolina where black people have literally been outlawed from the state. The novel itself intertextually incorporates both the real and the imagined, as each section of the text describing Cora’s journey is punctuated with real notices offering rewards for runaway slave women that Whitehead came across during his research for the novel. This immediately anchors the text in the “real,” suggesting that while Cora’s story is not

necessarily based on a true story, it could be said to be based on the truth of many untold stories.

Despite the fantastic nature of elements of the text like the railroad itself, Whitehead maintains a decidedly matter-of-fact tone throughout the novel. This in itself is a trope of the original slave narratives, as writers like Frederick Douglass attempted to relay their stories in plain language, to increase their credibility with a white audience, and to let the real horrors of slavery speak for themselves. Whitehead realizes that his reader has perhaps become dulled to the slave narrative form, and to the atrocities of slavery. Recent filmic depictions of slavery such as Steve McQueen's adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* and even *Django Unchained* have pushed the depictions of the brutal violence of slavery further and further in attempts to unsettle this desensitization on the part of the contemporary audience. Whitehead more subtly unsettles genre expectations in meta-fashion, playing into his audience's familiarity with the conventional form of the slave narrative, before he reveals the anachronistic conceit of the railroad over sixty pages into the narrative. As Cora and Caesar wonder at the station, complete with tiled walls and a bench to wait on, the station agent Lumbly shrugs off their incredulity. Caesar asks how far the tunnel goes, and Lumbly replies, "Far enough for you." He asks how the slaves who it is implied built the railroad did it, and he replies, "With their hands, how else?" (67).

And with that, we as readers are initiated into the world of a slave narrative that is in many ways familiar, and at the same time, completely disorienting. As readers, we accept, as Cora and Caesar must accept, that we cannot know how the train came to be, where it is headed, or even when it will show up. The train represents Cora and Caesar's



choice to embark on a journey beyond the horizon of their own imaginations. Cora's final escape returns to the unknown, unknowable nature of the railroad. She is captured from an idealized, black-run living community in Indiana by the slave catcher Ridgeway and his henchmen, and Ridgeway makes her show him a small underground railroad station that she has discovered. She attacks him in the tunnel, breaking his leg, and she escapes down the tracks, this time not in a train but in a handcar. Whitehead writes, "She pumped and pumped and rolled out into the light. Into the tunnel that no one had made, that led nowhere" (303). As she continues on, she wonders, "Was she traveling through the tunnel or digging it? Each time she brought her arms down on the lever, she drove a pickax into the rock, swung a sledge onto a railroad spike" (303). While Cora may not have any idea where she is headed, she has seized control of her journey towards freedom, metaphorically digging her own way out of slavery.

At the close of the novel, Cora emerges from the tunnel to meet an older black man named Ollie, who tells her he is headed to California. As she rides off in his wagon, Whitehead writes, "She wondered where he escaped from, how bad it was, and how far he traveled before he put it behind him" (306). The truth, as we have seen, and the contemporary truth that Whitehead has elaborated in the ahistorical realism of his novel, is that it is most likely impossible to fully "know" this man's experience. He represents a connection to a black communal identity, but it is a communal identity that is simultaneously real and known, and also unknowable and perforce imagined. Similarly, it is perhaps impossible to fully "leave" slavery "behind," and yet they forge ahead, towards an unknown, uncertain freedom (traveling West, of course, and to California, no less, that ever-present symbolic beacon of American possibility). Whitehead's text thus

plays cleverly in the interstices of individual freedom and communal identity that have characterized debates over the nature of black identity in the 20th/21st centuries. He unsettles our “dulled” reading of the slave narrative as genre, opening up new possibilities for working towards freedom.

These possibilities reside partially in the liminal space between the knowable and unknowable of slavery. In a recent essay on what she terms the “post-neo slave narrative,” Margo Natalie Crawford argues that these narratives reject the epistemological impetus to “know” slavery that drives previous neo-slave narratives, instead making a “move from the literary imagination that fills the gap (what historians cannot know) to the refusal to fill in the gaps but to linger in the unknown” (71). Viewing Whitehead’s novel in this context, then, I find that the text offers an important reminder in navigating the debates between Afro-Pessimists arguing for the ontological emptiness of blackness as identity, and those who locate possibilities for agency in postmodern performativity and embrace the “infinite” possibilities of post-black subjectivity. In finding that modernity itself is premised in fundamental ways upon the denial of black humanity, Afro-Pessimists claim that black communal identity is effectively empty as a basis for resistance. These scholars pay attention to material connections that can be made between the slave past and the present reality for African Americans via the prison industrial complex, sharecropping, voter intimidation, housing discrimination and other avenues, but they also attend to the lingering psychological impacts of slavery on African American identity and American identity more broadly. In the collection that contains Crawford’s aforementioned essay, co-editor Soyica Diggs Colbert writes that the collection as a whole suggests, “that the persistence of antiblack violence in the present

necessitates attending to that violence as the recurrence of not the thing itself but a nation-shaping psychic dynamic” (14). This is a somewhat Afro-Pessimist stance, and an important one.

In altering the perhaps familiar history of slavery to include modern instances of technology, Whitehead is clearly attuned to – and perhaps wishes to invoke -- this “nation-shaping dynamic.” However, I find that the text also offers an important example of how the slave past can be engaged with in a forward-looking, meta-black fashion. On a meta-textual level, the novel as novel forges connections to the “tradition” and the real history represented by the slave narrative, even as it upsets our dulled readings of the genre and pushes us to imagine the unimaginable. And on the level of narrative, Cora’s journey ends with both a connection to the slave past and an uncertainty of ever leaving that past behind, and with the performative possibility of continuing down the road, even when the destination seems uncertain or even unimaginable. Where Afro-pessimists might view the final destination of black identity in the contemporary moment as an intractable inevitability, Whitehead explores the meta-black possibilities of the speculative in jumping the well-worn tracks of the history of representations of blackness in America and charting a course for a potential life after social death.

### **But, Aren’t We All “Meta-?”: Towards a Liveable Black Future**

In assessing contemporary modes of cultural expression, it is not particularly novel to argue that we see profound shifts in paradigms of cultural expression and subjective identity beginning in the mid- to late- 20th century. However, in looking forward, I argue that incorporating a history of race and the black musical aesthetic into

an account of these societal changes is not only novel but necessary. On this topic, the text herein may raise more questions than it answers, however I hope that this examination of the meta-black aesthetic can provide important signposts as we move towards these answers.

In outlining recent transitions in these expressive frameworks, scholars have alternately termed this emergent cultural mode “Web 2.0,” “configurable,” “mash-up,” or “remix” culture. However, I find that these scholars have consistently underestimated or obscured the persistent role that racial identities play in this “new” world, and I would even go so far as to say that the “meta-” strategies for self-creation forged by people raced as black have exerted an under-theorized influence on this new cultural paradigm. This problem of the erasure of race in the context of new media is not a new one, and dates back to the advent of the internet, as scholars on race and new media such as Lisa Nakamura, Anna Everett, Alondra Nelson, and Kali Tal have pointed out.<sup>iii</sup> Nakamura finds the Internet of the 1990s to be characterized by what she calls a “fetish of interactivity,” the idea that, online, one’s identity is endlessly composable (1675). This idea is implicitly, if not explicitly, postracial, and numerous thinkers intervened in this cultural paradigm to point out what they termed a “digital divide,” where racial and ethnic minorities (and people of lower income) tended to have less access to the Internet’s supposed utopian space. These divides have narrowed in recent years, due in part to more affordable computers, more accessible wireless networks, and the rise of Internet-ready handheld devices. Additionally, there are highly visible examples in the contemporary moment of black presence and community online, with online mobilization around #BlackLivesMatter and Black Twitter serving as only two well-known examples.

But even in the era of Web 2.0, there remains a prominent strain of post-racial ideology. Nakamura points this out when she writes of the new era of the Internet, “While it [Web 2.0] neither posits a postracial utopia based on racial abolitionism nor envisions racialized others and primitives as signs of cosmopolitan technofetishism, it does make claims to harness collective intelligence by allowing everyone to participate in a more or less equal fashion. These claims are implicitly postracial” (1679). And Nelson notes that assertion of black identity can be seen as obstructing this idealized online democracy, writing that “Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress” (1).

The provisional claim that I would like to make here, and one that I hope will contribute to developing conceptions of blackness in the technologized present and future, is that not only is blackness not an obstruction to these meta-narratives of technological progress, but the meta- techniques of selfhood developed in the meta-black aesthetic that I outline have profoundly shaped and influenced this cultural paradigm.<sup>iv</sup> To take one contemporary example of what is at stake in making this claim, Aram Sinnreich, who coined the term “configurable culture” (roughly synonymous with Web 2.0) makes the claim that what he calls “DJ consciousness” is characteristic of life in contemporary society. But, despite the fact that he links DJ consciousness to Du Boisian “double consciousness,” writing that “DJs . . . are always hearing themselves through the ears of others” (203), Sinnreich seems to trip himself up a bit in trying to explain the African American contribution to this DJ consciousness. He effectively glosses over the centuries of complicated racial history that made this consciousness possible (and indeed, necessary), ultimately making the universalizing claim that “the very act of engaging

culture through a configurable lens entails a recognition that we are all marginalized and culturally disenfranchised” by the way that contemporary institutionalized power treats cultural expression (203).

I find that thorough considerations of the strategies incubated and innovated in the meta-black aesthetic are thus necessary in theorizing how subjects of all nationalities and ethnicities negotiate and perform individual identity and communal belonging within and against a veritable flood of mass-mediated and commodified information and iconography. This is not to claim that configurable culture would not exist at all without this aesthetic and cultural tradition, nor is it to repeat the implicit and explicit post-racial ideologies of theorists of configurable culture. As social movements like #BlackLivesMatter and critical strains such as that represented by the Afro-Pessimists point out, race continues to materially “matter,” in both real and virtual spaces. But if in fact our contemporary postmodern modes of elaborating subjectivities are mediated in fundamental ways through popular and commercial culture, then I think that it is critical for cultural theorists to examine the “lower frequencies” of the under-analyzed precedents for this mode of identity in the meta-black aesthetic. And in looking forward to the futures of blackness as identity, it will be important to acknowledge the extent to which, like Ellison’s narrator, this meta-black aesthetic speaks for (and through) us all.

### Notes

<sup>i</sup> In his book-length study of the genre, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy cites the influence of the black cultural nationalism of the late 1960s as a major impetus for the increased interest in the neo-slave narrative in the 70s and 80s. Considering the investment of black cultural nationalists during this period in attempting to delineate and define liberatory modes of black subjectivity and black aesthetics, it should be no surprise that many writers turned to the slave past, and to this originary form of the African American literary tradition.

<sup>ii</sup> Spaulding finds that the writers of “postmodern slave narratives” “force us to question the ideologies embedded within the ‘realistic’ representation of slavery in traditional history and historical fiction” (2). But rather than straying entirely into postmodern

misdirection, the reality of the slave past expressed through the form of the slave narrative tethers these authors to some notion of communal history and identity, revealing in their work what Spaulding terms a “tense relationship between the anti-foundationalism of postmodernism’s stance and the black nationalist goal of reclaiming that past” (3).

<sup>iii</sup> Nakamura writes of the internet of the 1990s, “Web 1.0, or ‘cyber’ space, conceptualized the Internet as an alternative reality, a different place in which one could exercise agency and live out fantasies of control. This control extended to all aspects of personal identity, including and especially race” (1679).

<sup>iv</sup> Kal Tal has made a similar point in a 1996 article for *Wired* magazine, which, while it was influential, has not seemed to have been extensively picked up in the academic literature. She writes that “African-American critical theory provides very sophisticated tools for the analysis of cyberculture, since African-American critics have been discussing the problem of multiple identities, fragmented personae, and liminality for more than 100 years.” I would agree, but I would extend “critical theory” to include aesthetic expression like that which I analyze herein. I would also offer that what a conception of meta-blackness has to offer this conversation is that in addition to integrating identity and multiplicity, it also integrates the sampling of pop cultural specters (of blackness) that characterize contemporary identity.

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